



Identity crisis offers opportunity

By Ray Adrian Macalalag – September 7, 2021

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It was not a well-rested weekend for Ilonggos. While also suffering with more cases of Covid-19 than ever, another pandemic seems to hit the Region, the city of Iloilo in particular. The Iloilo Esplanade became the ultimate week-ender with a harmless photo of the pioneering riverside infrastructure undergoing a drone inspection. It contained one hashtag which the Ilonggos did not take lightly – #BuildBuildBuild. It is now official; we also fell prey to the ever trending hashtag which already drew flak in other parts of the country.

The Build, Build, Build (BBB) program as described in its website is... well, I cannot find it. However, I was able to search on the internet and found a Philippine News Agency (PNA) article which described it as the Duterte administration's ambitious infrastructure development plan that is composed of thousands of projects to be implemented all over the country. It mentioned thousands. So I had to once again go back to the BBB website and to no avail, I found a handful of projects, definitely not a thousand. In fact as of this writing, only 24 were listed under DPWH on the website.

The entire Philippines again underwent some form of cell division in terms of opinion. It was apparent that while some have presented actual facts, these were regarded as fake or false information. So the argument weakened as they pleased. Furthermore, they claimed that the drone inspection was to make sure that projects, specifically BBB, were not ghost projects.

Last 2019, the PNA published an article of the inauguration of the alleged section of Esplanade. Then in 2021, a drone inspection was undertaken to make sure it was not a ghost project. Better late than never, I guess. Ghost projects were effectively eradicated long before when the DPWH began employing the Project Monitoring System and eventually the Project and Contract Monitoring Application which had several redundancies to ensure transparency.

Getting confused, I again searched and came across the same report entitled, "Review of the Build, Build, Build Program: Implications on the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2017-2022", from the Philippine Institute of Development Studies. I already made reference from this in a past article I wrote. On page 9 of the report, it threw a recommendation that would literally destroy the program's brand. In verbatim, "a good understanding of the BBB program is critical in examining its implications on the PDP targets. The BBB program should be clearly defined in terms of what it really is and what it covers." So, I was not the only one who was confused. Even the highly regarded Philippine government's primary socioeconomic policy think tank sought for clarification.

Nevertheless, the same government-run non-stock, non-profit corporation was able to provide a proxy definition referencing the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) which, according to the report, said that the BBB projects are priority projects within the Public Investment Program and the Infrastructure Flagship Projects (IFP).

Meanwhile, the same authority claimed that Western Visayas had 10 projects under the BBB program. But apparently, what was cited was an opinion article from a national news outlet. I searched high and low for actual references for the things which were mentioned but no, that was it. A link to an article was more than enough to say it was all facts when it was just an opinion like mine right now. The only difference is I had evidence to support my claim.

The updated list of IFPs from NEDA's website only mentioned three infrastructure projects being implemented or under the watch of DPWH – these are the Bacolod Negros Occidental Economic Highway, Boracay Circumferential Road and the Panay-Guimaras Bridge. Nothing more.

Having started my career with the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), I was fortunate to have spent sleepless nights preparing presentations and reports. And being part of the planning of most projects taking shape these days, I had a fair share of knowledge how these came about. The Iloilo Esplanade is not part of the BBB program. It was a multi-year project with its first sections completed as early as 2012. The BBB program was not launched until 2017.

The way I analyzed things, nobody seemed to dare define the BBB program because with all the blurred lines, anybody can play along the nomenclature. Its identity crisis was an opportunity. Imagine making your name synonymous to Build Build Build. Imagine your name immortalized in every chunk of concrete and piece of steel bar. Having no clear definition, anything you set your drones on and post on social media are all your hard work. Everything. Eyes of Medusa. Touch of Midas.

As a civil servant, I would always prioritize the best interest of the Filipino people and the interest of authentic public service. The outrage of Ilonggos was not just about the Iloilo Esplanades belonging to the past administration's vision; maybe to some extent. But what the disgruntled Filipino citizenry was aiming for was the fact that infrastructure, whether paid for by our hard-earned taxes or the private sector, some people were piggy-backing on the accomplishment as if it is all theirs with their resources and all their efforts. As public servants, it is our job, not our voluntary or charity work.

“It is the policy of the State to promote a high standard of ethics in public service. Public officials and employees shall at all times be accountable to the people and shall discharge their duties with utmost responsibility, integrity, competence and loyalty, act with patriotism and justice, lead modest lives, and uphold public interest over personal interest.” This is Rule II of the Rules Implementing the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees. So for now, they are probably doing what they are doing to be “accountable to the people”. I do hope in the end; they still hold true to “uphold public interest over personal interest.”