



POLICY BRIEF

No. 2020-07 (April 3, 2020)

Why the Political Boundaries can be Misleading

Victor S. Venida

The political clearly does not match the social and economic boundaries, this we witnessed when the quarantine was first imposed. And this should make us realize how crucial it is to understand, appreciate and accept the social and economic forces at work for political decisions to become effective and equitable.

The enhanced quarantine was first imposed on Metro Manila or the National Capital Region on Sunday, 15 March. It has allowed “essential” work to continue to maintain the basic requirements of society, namely health workers, skeleton staff of selected industries, those involved in food preparation and delivery, delivery of basic consumer commodities among others. It was understandable that Metro Manila would be initially subject to quarantine since the coronavirus was regarded as having come from China and Metro Manila is the main gateway to the Philippines of most international travelers. Imposing restrictions on entry and exit of people from the NCR would be a logical attempt at containing the spread of the virus within the Metro Manila area.

But by Monday, the dissonance between the political and economic boundaries were stark: huge traffic jams occurred at the main entry points to the NCR, at NLEX, SLEX, Marcos Highway, Ortigas, and other places. Many of the essential work force were actually trying to enter the NCR to report for work but could not. A number of news reports have noted that the work force of several “essential” businesses have not been reporting for work, with the understandable apprehension of what this might imply for the continued supply of food and other basic commodities.

The thing is that when one refers to Metro Manila as a social and economic region, this encompasses several barangays outside of the political boundaries of the NCR, in Bulacan, Rizal, Laguna and Cavite. The US Census Bureau since the 1940s has always collected data for what is termed as a “metropolitan statistical area” (MSA), defined as a geographical region with an urban core and close economic ties throughout the region. This recognizes the fact that many people do have work in the city centers but actually live in a town or city outside of the political jurisdiction of the city where the urban core is located. The usual reason for this is that housing is more affordable outside the city centers and for as long as transport facilities are available, a lot of workers in the city centers (usually the middle- and lower-income paid ones) would rather live away from the urban core.

A few years ago, the then Manila mayor Joseph Estrada had expressed disbelief at the Census data that showed the population of Manila as having declined in the 2010 census, and increased slightly with the 2015 census. He argued that there were more people going to the city than before. He clearly was confused between the resident population of the city, and the daytime population, comprised largely of those who go to Manila for work, schooling, shopping, pilgrimage, entertainment, and general business, and many of these do not live in the city but elsewhere. The same can be said for the working population of the NCR in general.

A lot of the middle- and low-income workers of the NCR do live in the towns and cities right outside because housing in these places would be more affordable, either of purchase or for rent. They bear the brunt of the

increasingly inefficient transport system of the capital as they spend hours on daily commute from their homes to their place of work. Family members may send the younger ones to school in their towns but in many cases, also in schools located within the political jurisdiction of the NCR. At the same time, many living within the NCR might also send children to school right outside, or to the malls. Many who live in Marikina would regularly go to Robinson's Metro East and Sta Lucia malls which are located in Cainta, or to SM Masinag already in Antipolo.

This would show how integrated the economies of the NCR with those of nearby towns and cities in Bulacan, Rizal, Laguna and Cavite. Yet not all of these provinces can be considered as part of the economic zone of Metro Manila. One can argue in fact that not all of Antipolo's barangays would be covered. But one cannot easily obtain this information. The same can be said for the economic region covered by Cebu City, Baguio City, Angeles in Pampanga and many others.

This explains the huge traffic jams at the established political boundaries of the NCR when the enhanced quarantine was imposed. Many of the "essential" workers do occupy the middle- but mostly lower-paid jobs, as health workers, sanitation workers, food preparation and delivery, retail personnel and the like. And many of them can only afford to live in the barangays which are right outside the NCR. The implementation of the restrictions on movement used the political boundaries which are not consistent with the social and economic activities. And these traffic jams effectively countered any demand for social distancing.

Perhaps it would be necessary for the Philippine Statistical Authority, as it implements the Census, to consider developing this notion of a metropolitan statistical region. It would need to identify which barangays in the towns and cities immediately outside a major urban core (such as Metro Manila, Cebu, Iloilo, Baguio and others) would have a substantial proportion of residents who regularly travel to the urban core for work, schooling and the like. This information would be worthwhile in terms of transport planning, urban zoning, product flow and logistics, and emergency management. This will be one very significant form of inclusivity as many of the lower income households that make the urban centers thrive and function happen to live outside these cities.

If we had the information on the extent of the economic region of Metro Manila, then the checkpoints could have been relocated which could have minimized all these problems that quarantine has wrought. Of course, we hope the need for quarantine would not happen again, but we still need transport and urban planning.

DISCLAIMER: The contents or opinions expressed in this brief are the author(s) sole responsibility and do not necessarily reflect the views of ADMU Economics Department and/or ACERD.