

Pangasinan Health Summit
Clark, Pampanga, 25 September 2008
Remarks by Ambassador Alistair MacDonald, European Commission

Governor Espino, Vice-Governor Agabas, LMP President Mayor Guico, colleagues from USAid, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, partners in health from both national and local government,

I am delighted to be with you today, on the occasion of this first Pangasinan Provincial Health Summit, and to have the opportunity to salute the work of the Province of Pangasinan in promoting effective and inclusive public health care across the Province. I understand, Governor, that you have put health at the top of your development agenda, and I would like to commend you for that.

From the perspective of the European Commission, we have been working for some years with the Department of Health, to strengthen health care in the Philippines. In 1995 we had provided a grant of €17m (about PHP 1.1 billion) for the Women's Health and Safe Motherhood Project. I remember that project particularly well, since it was the last project that I had helped to prepare before I left the Philippines at the end of my first tour of duty here – and since it was the first project in which we were able to address health issues, including women's health and reproductive health, in our development partnership with the Philippines.

More recently, the health sector has become the primary focus of our development cooperation in the Philippines, with grants totalling some €45m (PHP 3.0 billion) in the last couple of years for two major programmes :

- the Health Sector Policy Support Programme, covering 16 provinces across the country, including Pangasinan
- and its cousin, the Mindanao Health Sector Policy Support Programme, covering conflict-affected areas in Mindanao.

Both of these projects are in support of the DoH's F1 programme – Fourmula One for Health – and both projects aim to support pro-poor interventions focusing on comprehensive primary health care, and working particularly to improve basic health services at the provincial level, including the strengthening of obstetric care and the provision of reproductive health services, directly addressing mother and child welfare. Crucially for the success and sustainability of these efforts, the two projects are implemented through a sector approach, which is now deeply anchored within DoH's reform agenda.

We have very strong expectations for this programme, as does DoH. In particular, we look forward to seeing clear and convincing results in terms of impact and performance :

- through increased enrolment in PhilHealth
- through the upgrading of priority health facilities, to allow them to be accredited with PhilHealth and thus receive PhilHealth funds
- through the increased availability of essential medicines, building on improved efficiency in drug procurement
- through strengthening inter-local health zones
- and, last but not least, through improved public finance management. PFM, together with the other dimensions of governance, is of crucial importance for the Philippines and for the EC, since the proper management of public finance is a precondition for social and economic development, and since both the Philippine government and the European Commission are accountable to our respective taxpayers.

But no programme of this kind can succeed without the effective and dedicated efforts of local government – provincial and municipal officials, and all the staff of the health services, from managers to midwives, are the key players in strengthening health-service provision, without whom all the efforts of DoH, and the support of international partners, would be to little avail.

And in this context, I am particularly pleased that our project is working so well here in Pangasinan – and that we have been able to channel our support for Pangasinan through budget support, given the relatively good public-finance management status of your province.

I understand also that there you have been able to achieve a significant increase in the PhilHealth enrolment of the poorest groups in society – the "indigent" of the province, to use the inelegant term of Philippine legislation. And I gather that the Province will shortly complete its targeted identification of the poor, to ensure that PhilHealth can best reach the most needy. So my compliments and my thanks, Governor, to you and your staff in the Provincial Health Office, for ensuring the smooth implementation of our project.

Before I conclude, though, I would like to say a word about one issue which is obviously of particular relevance in the context of health service delivery, but which is no less crucial for every single aspect of the efforts of the Philippines to address the challenges of poverty and the opportunities of sustainable development. And here in the Province of Pangasinan, looking at issues of public health and poverty, I would be remiss if I did not mention the other P-word – population.

You don't need me to tell you that the current level of population growth in the Philippines, still above 2%, continues to put at risk all the government's efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals, all your work to provide effective public services, all your commitment to build a better future for your children and for future generations.

Around 1985, when I first took up a posting in SE Asia, the population of the Philippines and that of Thailand were almost identical, at around 55 million. Now, only some twenty years later, Thailand is around 60 million, while the Philippines is coming up for 90 million. That's 35 million extra citizens in 20 years, looking for extra jobs, calling for effective education and health services, hoping for comparable levels of infrastructure to that existing in other countries in the region, seeking to protect the futures of their own children.

I used to be a historian, before I became a civil servant, so let me step back a little further. In 1918, the total population of the Philippines was a fraction over 10 million. Now, only 90 years later, there are 10 million Filipinos working overseas, seeking the employment opportunities that their own country has been unable to offer them.

I won't comment further on the statistics, since the figures are so patently obvious. But I will underline that the link between population and poverty, and between poverty and population, is no less obvious, and has been emphasised at several international conferences, including of course the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994.

Here in the Philippines, all the surveys show that people want to have access to modern reproductive health services, want to have the freedom to choose how to build their families and build a healthy and prosperous future for their children.

A number of local governments have already taken a lead in addressing these issues within their own legislation and their own procedures – I'm thinking in particular of Aurora, of Mountain Province, of South Cotabato just as a few examples.

But I find it astonishing, and very shortsighted, that the national government is not prepared to take the lead in helping to inform the public about the importance of an effective reproductive health policy, and in ensuring that adequate resources are made available for reproductive health. Local governments may be free to choose, but they need to be free to act as well, and that requires resources.

As an outsider to the Philippines, I sometimes feel reluctant to comment on the very emotive debate on population which is running here currently. But since a number of legislators have taken their courage in both hands and are trying to do something about reproductive health, I can only wish them every success.

Mr Governor, let me close my remarks by expressing again my very best wishes for the success of all your efforts to strengthen the provision of public health services for the benefit of the people of Pangasinan, and my thanks for all the work which you and your colleagues have been carrying out already. Maraming salamat po, sa inyong lahat, sa inyong trabaho para sa kalusugan sa Pangasinan.