RFCA Interview with
Prof. Doracie Zoleta-Nantes
Australian National University (ANU)

1. Prof. Zoleta-Nantes, could you please tell the RFCA audience about your early life and education in the Philippines?

I am a probinsyana who studied in an elementary public school and a small private high school in Lucban Quezon. I was born in Lucban, Quezon in 1960. My mother is Maria Francisca Baldovino Zoleta and my father was the late Getulio Zoleta. We are from a family of small-scale land-owning coconut and rice farmers. My parents instilled among us the value of studying hard and getting a good education – us include my younger brother Rolando, who works as a lawyer, and my younger sister Loreta, a medical doctor who specializes in internal medicine.

I finished Bachelor of Science in Human Ecology at the University of the Philippines in Los Banos with the support of a scholarship grant from the Philippine Ministry of Natural Resources. I completed the degree of Master of Arts in Geography at the University of Hawaii with funding from the East-West Center Scholarship Grant, and my PhD in Geography at RUTGERS, the State University of New Jersey in the United States with a Fulbright Scholarship Grant.

I am married to Engineer Cristofin Nantes, who is also from Lucban and we have a 26 year-old daughter. Her name is Maria Josefa, or Joey and she recently graduated in May of this year as a Doctor of Medicine from the College of Medicine at the University of the Philippines and the Philippine General Hospital in Manila.

2. Your areas of expertise are Studies of Asian Societies, Urban and Regional Studies, Social and Cultural Geography and Social Policy. Could you please tell the RFCA audience about some of your experiences in these areas over the years.

I started my career in 1981 as a field researcher of the quasi-governmental NGO – the Environmental Centre of the Philippines. I was among a group of pioneers who promoted community participation in environmental planning at the barangay level. It took a while to set this up in 10 provinces in the Philippines. We collaborated with barangay and town officials and worked with the people. We were given funding by the Philippine Government, the UNICEF and the USAID. We set up some good practices in providing rural farmers and fisher folks with livelihood projects that took into account their everyday health and nutritional requirements, environmental protection and family planning and population control.

I participated in education planning and institutional research in 1983 in the Southern Luzon Polytechnic College as part of my return service to the Ministry of Natural Resources for my college scholarship. I started teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in the University of the Philippines in Diliman after the completion of my master's degree in the University of Hawaii in 1986 and initiated research – with funding from the Center of Asian Studies in Amsterdam - on land reform and agrarian transitions in the Philippines. I became very interested with the impacts of unplanned conversions of irrigated agricultural lands to urban uses on food security and increasing landlessness among small farmers in the Bulacan and Quezon Provinces and their political and economic repercussions.

in 1990 Mt. Pinatubo erupted while I was doing research on land conversions in Central Luzon. This explosive event offered new challenges for me. I decided to do an advanced study on environmental hazards and disaster management at Rutgers University in New Jersey. I taught several courses in Rutgers and worked in its learning resource centres and became more interested in the political and ecological components of hazards and disaster management.

After my doctoral studies in RUTGERS, with other free-lance researchers from UP and in collaboration with the Department of Agrarian Reform, the World Bank asked us to make some policy studies on land reform implementation in the Philippines. We looked closely into the possibilities of community managed agrarian reform programs in ten provinces in Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao. We developed some program strategies and recommendations on

how community-managed land reform projects can contribute to the improvement of living conditions of landless members of agricultural communities in the Philippine countryside. They were piloted in Bondoc Peninsula in Quezon Province.

In the Department of Geography at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, where I used to teach before coming here in Canberra, and where I am now affiliated as an adjunct professor, my colleagues and graduate and senior students have collaborated with urban-based NGOs, in undertaking studies on the importance of environmental management and land use planning as effective strategies to reduce flood risks and other related environmental hazards that annually affect Metropolitan Manila and its surrounding regions.

Right now, in my capacity as member of the research school and teaching faculty of the Resource Management in Asia Pacific at Crawford School of Public Policy in the College of Asia-Pacific at the Australian National University, we are implementing an AusAid Public Sector Linkages Program on integrating Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction in local community initiatives in the provinces of Albay, Bohol, Quezon, Lanao del Norte and Misamis Oriental.

3. I note with interest that you have a research interest in "intersecting geographies of migrations." Is this similar to the study of "transmigration" from rural areas to the cities, which has seen great social, cultural and economic effects across the developing world? Also, how does this relate to the Philippines?

Yes, it is in parallel with transmigration studies from rural places into urban centres in other countries. We did some studies in Indonesia in collaboration with the Akatiga Center in Bandung and its nearby regions. We compared their situations with conditions in the Province of Laguna and investigated on the impacts of overseas migrations on transformation in rural economies in the two provinces in Indonesia and the Philippines. We documented the impacts of remittance on land ownership and practice of agriculture, and explored on the reasons behind the two governments' actively sending of low-wage workers abroad. In brief we compared and collaborated on identifying and studying the relationship between transnational migration, remittances and changing agrarian conditions.

These practices and wide-ranging social phenomena happen on a wide-scale basis in the Philippines. Parents sell their lands to support the decision of their children to work abroad. Workers abroad send remittances to their families in

the Philippines. This system has corresponding impacts on family relations and economic activities in many areas. This has led to the changing landscapes of residential neighbourhoods, such as in barangays where palatial Italian villas stand side by side with native bahay kubos in fishing communities in Mabini, Batangas.

4. One of the environmental problems in Metro Manila is flooding. What are the best solutions to help address this problem?

To identify workable solutions we should cite some problems that cause flooding in Metro Manila. In 2009, more than half of the low-lying areas of Metro Manila were flooded. Prior to that, in 2000, we estimated that about 7 % or 44 sq km of Metro Manila were inundated annually with floodwaters, and cause about Php 900 million worth of property damage (US $ 18 million). This problem will continue to happen in the metropolis every rainy and typhoon season in the future.

There are physical and technical components of flooding. The main physical causes of flooding are surface runoff, tidal variation, monsoon rains, changes in groundwater hydrology, and tropical storm occurrences. The technical components of flooding are deterioration and poor maintenance of flood infrastructure, system failures of flood control due to garbage and other debris, land subsidence due to groundwater extraction, and lack of funding to maintain flood control system.

Other contributory reasons are rapid expansion of built-up areas, increasing number of reclamation areas, land use changes in in the watershed areas of the NCR, erosion of topsoil in upland regions due to deforestation and sedimentation and siltation of major river systems. FYI, only 10 % of the drainage facilities in Metro Manila is dredged, de-clogged or maintained each year (14 meters a day) – this is amidst the fact that indiscriminate waste disposal seriously clogs the storm drainage canals and waterways. The river banks are inaccessible- either they were land grabbed by adjoining lot owners or they were encroached upon as places for building government offices and squatter settlement.

There are other reasons to cite here, most particularly on the politics of flooding – which is on how our government officials fail to prioritize flooding due to lack of knowledge and short-term view on undertaking programs in the Philippines. Thus, one can expect that flood disasters in the Philippines will recur annually and are bound to bring more devastation in the future.

Flood adjustments distinguish between those which modify the flood event, those which modify human vulnerability to floods, and those which distribute flood losses. For flood adjustments, we can do the following: structural and non-structural means of reducing flood disaster potential.

Structural or engineering approach involves large-scale, capital intensive construction of levees and floodwalls, or modifying the river channel through deepening, widening and straightening to increase its capacity to contain flood waters, and limit the extent by which floodwaters can flow across flood plains. They may involve stream catchment controls as flood abatement.

Flood adaptation and adjustment methods include efforts to reduce the harmful effects of floods. There are indigenous adjustments, such as building houses on stilts to raise them above the floodplains.

There are also non-structural flood adjustments, such as those that have been introduced into societies through application of modern science and technology This includes high technology flood forecasting and flood control systems. Paying close attention to managing land-use change properly is another workable solution. For example, reduce the rate of urban development within the upper parts of catchments and construct buildings outside floodplains though planning or regulatory mechanisms.

Another approach is judicious evacuation of people and their property that are in the path of floods through timely and improved flood forecasting and warning issuance.

Another strategy is to reduce the effects of floods on communities through provision of flood insurance, flood relief and other social security measures.

A long-term strategy is floodplain management, which is a combination of adjustment such as regulation of floodplain development that is encouraged by flood insurance-based incentives. It is integrated with other measures such as strict observance of building codes and flood-proofing techniques.

All these approaches refer to a need for an organized urban planning and metropolitan wide project implementation. This necessitates an environmental approach to managing flood hazards and disasters. This is based on the view that social processes, economic and political decisions, and physical processes influence the creation of flood hazards and disasters. It rejects the narrow, single-disciplinary or partially-based approaches in favour of multi-disciplinary ones.

After the Tropical Storms Ketsana and Pharma or Typhoons Ondoy and Pepeng in 2009, the Philippine Government has made the following recommendations: establishment of a legal institutional framework for disaster risk reduction at all administrative levels. This led to the enactment of the DRRM bill which calls for strengthening of community-based disaster risk reduction and management, and mainstreaming of DRRM into local governance, planning and budgeting system.

Educating the people on the importance and basics of DRRM is salient. We should come up with data bases and knowledge system that may guide people in planning and implementation of necessary programs and strategies to reduce flood disaster risks.

5. How aware are Filipinos about care for urban and rural environments compared to other neighbouring countries, and what strategies do you think could help improve the nexus of social, environmental and developmental consciousness of Filipinos and the wider Asia Pacific populace?

There is a book chapter that is titled "Historical and geographical framing of policy changes, ecological problems, governance strategies and institutional approaches in managing the Philippine environment", which I recently submitted to Professor Phil Hirsch of the University of Sydney. It will be published by the Routledge Inc.

The book will provide a comprehensive regional overview of Southeast Asian environmental systems and an understanding of how environmental issues are dealt with by Southeast Asian people who are affected by a number of environmental problems and challenges. This will be a good read for people and will provide a comprehensive answer to this big question. However, to partly address your question, let me state here some of the things that I indicated on the chapter's conclusion:

"Mere formulation and mandating of environmental policies will not always solve our environmental problems. Guidelines on policy implementation may conflict when interpreted differently by various stakeholders with competing economic interests and access to power and decision-making. Many state regulatory policies require top-down management and put a heavy burden among financially-strapped national and local government units which may not have the political will and institutional capacity to enforce them.

These issues highlight the need for stakeholders to involve themselves in participatory environmental resource management. These circumstances highlight the importance of executing the following engagements: incorporation of local knowledge and indigenous resource management systems in government-sanctioned guidelines on environmental governance; addressing concerns that pertain to livelihood, poverty alleviation, food security, social welfare and well-being in the establishment and implementation of environment-mindful development programs; and educating and increasing people's capability to undertake these concerns.

Members of organizations and local government officials need to recognise the comparative advantage of working together with partner institutions and send their messages across to national and provincial policy makers who can and will translate policy guidelines into best practices. The imperative of doing this at the soonest time possible is formidable - environmental degradation decreases the resilience of ecosystems and increases vulnerabilities of communities.

At the backdrop of global atmospheric warming, there have been intensifying extreme weather events in various places, such as cyclones, floods and droughts, and millions of Filipinos will become more vulnerable economically, physically ,and socially. This scenario has been building up in the country for many years already.

The need for more grounded economic development initiatives that take into account the diversity of goals and interests among various stakeholders, and growth agendas that are mindful of and closely integrated with the tenets of sustainable environmental utilisation, resource conservation, and ecosystem development becomes more significant".

Prof. Doracie Zoleta-Nantes on behalf of Radyo Filipino Canberra-Australia thank you for your time. It has been a privilege interviewing you.