

ELVIRA C. ABLAZA
PRESIDENT AND CEO, PRIMEX

CHAMPIONING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

BY ARVIN YANA



Elvira C. Ablaza has spent the last 19 years as president and chief executive officer PRIMEX, now a top international consulting firm credited for the success of the design and implementation of development projects across various sectors in the Asian region – from fisheries, aquaculture, and environmental management, to health and infrastructure, among others.

If, to others, environmental advocacy (as a facet of corporate social responsibility) is a means to conduct businesses, it is itself one of PRIMEX's and Ablaza's main businesses – that of managing high-impact environmental projects meant for economic sustainability that also often concludes with relevant policies for governments/public sector to adopt.

Since the time Ablaza founded the company with friends, PRIMEX has completed more than 150 projects, not only in the Philippines but in 16 other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and China. A large fraction of these foreign-assisted projects were on environmental and resource management and had Ablaza as either a project director, co-director, a team leader, coordinator or a technical specialist, with clients ranging from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank (WB), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN/FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and various international aid agencies.

"In all of these projects, I worked on ensuring the highly satisfactory performance of the consultant team, the excellent quality of the services, and the timely completion of the expected outputs," Ablaza says.

Just last year, two ADB Project Completion Review (PCR) missions rated as "successful," "highly relevant," and "effective" the implementation of two pioneering coastal fisheries resource man-

agement (CFRM) projects prepared and managed by PRIMEX, both with Ablaza as one of the project directors.

Earlier, the Coastal Community Development and Fisheries Resource Management (COFISH) Project (designed and implemented from 1996 to 2005) in Indonesia was assessed by the ADB Mission to have been "effective" in addressing depletion of coastal fishery resources and the pervasive poverty and social disadvantage of coastal communities, and in meeting most of its objectives and target outcomes, exceeding most of its CFRM targets. Like its Indonesian counterpart, the Philippine Fisheries Resource Management Project (FRMP), designed in 1996 and implemented in 1999-2005, was evaluated by an ADB PCR Mission as "successful" in having reversing the trend of declining municipal capture fisheries in the country and having met, among other milestones, 95% of its physical targets.

Both projects have provided new paradigms on coastal resource management for the both countries particularly for Indonesia's Directorate General of Capture Fisheries (DGCF) of the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF), and the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR).

Critical in the environmental projects that Ablaza managed has been the involvement of communities in the identification of issues, resource management planning and influencing public policies affecting the use of those resources.

"As we implement projects related to ecosystems management, we make sure community organization and mobilization is there as I believe that it is a critical process required to improve the capacity of the local community to participate in the coastal resource management planning process," Ablaza says. "Once we make them part of the whole process, we are building their sense of ownership of coastal management efforts (in the case of CRM projects) at the community level and therefore strengthens sustainability mechanisms."

This business of making communities make the most of their environment is, to Ablaza, "a social contribution that is indeed hard to quantify."

A former (and the first woman) president of the Institute of Management Consultants of the Philippines (IMPHIL) and the Confederation of Filipino Consulting Organizations (COFILCO), Ablaza is also currently engaged until March 2009 as administrative manager of ADB's Safeguard Policy Update, an undertaking that ensures ADB projects do achieve sustained development impact and poverty reduction by minimizing and mitigating adverse environmental impacts, social costs to third parties, or marginalization of vulnerable groups that may result from development projects.

Ablaza holds an MS in Biology (*meritissimus*) from the University of Santo Tomas (UST) and a BS in Biology (*magna cum laude*) from the College of the Holy Spirit in Manila where she also taught Biology, Zoology and Botany. In 1980, she was selected by FAO from a field of 200 nominees from all over the world as the first recipient of an FAO Professional Fellowship on the Fisheries Aspects of Integrated River Basin Development in Rome, Italy.