



SUCCESS STORY

Philippines' Green Benches To Deliver Environmental Justice

Specialized Courts and Judges Appointed to Resolve Environmental Disputes



ECO-Asia Staff

USAID-AECEN brought together Asian judges with environmental experience to help the Philippines develop its own "green benches."

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Supreme Court Chief Justice Reynato S. Puno

The Supreme Court of the Philippines in January 2008 designated 117 courts for improved environmental adjudication. The Supreme Court and the Philippine Judicial Academy (PHILJA) also announced plans for specialized training for personnel in those courts.

The designation of the new courts is the result of USAID's ECO-Asia program, which promotes environmental justice through the Asian Environmental Compliance and Enforcement Network (AECEN), an organization of 12 environmental agencies in 10 countries. AECEN was founded and is supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Asian Development Bank (SDB).

Court cases addressing environmental issues have increased in Asia as a result of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and related ecological problems. In response to AECEN's leadership, courts in the region are developing "green benches," or environmental courts.

With USAID-AECEN support, the Philippine Supreme Court and PHILJA organized the Asian Justices Forum on the Environment in 2007 to share recommendations with judges from Australia, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the US. Discussion at the forum centered on strategies for strengthening the Philippine Supreme Court's human and institutional capacity to adjudicate environmental cases. As a result, the Supreme Court established specialized trial-level environmental courts. AECEN leveraged resources from other institutions, including PHILJA, United Nations Environment Programme, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, United Nations Development Programme-Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme, Haribon Foundation, and Asia Pacific Jurist Association.

AECEN is continuing to facilitate dialogue among judiciaries that have green courts. It is working with others, including the Supreme Court of Indonesia to develop an environmental certification program for judges. The benefits of establishing specialized environmental courts are clear to Philippine Chief Justice Reynato S. Puno who stated, "All efforts will be undertaken so that the newly designated environmental courts will be manned by 'green judges' – skillful judges who not only master environmental laws, but also understand the philosophy of environmentalism and ecologism."