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Cities of Philippines

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Introduction

The Philippines, with its more than 7,000 islands, is not only celebrated for its lush landscapes and crystal-clear beaches but also for a dynamic urban tapestry woven into the fabric of its history. Scattered across the archipelago are 149 chartered cities, each serving as a vibrant stage where history, culture, commerce, and community converge in distinctive ways. These cities—ranging from sprawling metropolises to heritage enclaves and booming regional centers—are as varied as the islands they rise from, reflecting both the complexities and the promise of Filipino urban life.

For centuries, cities in the Philippines have been at the forefront of transformation. From the Spanish colonial era, which laid the foundations of many of today's urban centers, to the rapid modernization of the postwar period, these cities have played pivotal roles in shaping the country's identity. They have witnessed dramatic shifts—serving as seats of power, trading crossroads, bastions of resistance, and melting pots of culture, language, and tradition. The result is a network of urban centers that is as diverse as it is interconnected, each leaving an indelible imprint on the nation's story.

Today, urbanization is reshaping the Philippine landscape at an unprecedented pace. Over half of all Filipinos live in cities, making urban centers not just the engines of economic growth but also the theaters of daily life for millions. From the dense, ever-buzzing cityscape of Metro Manila to the innovative and eco-conscious zones of Davao and Cebu, the Philippine urban experience encompasses both challenge and opportunity. Ambitious infrastructure projects, burgeoning technology sectors, and the rise of smart city initiatives are charting new directions for growth and livability, while issues like housing shortages, traffic congestion, and environmental vulnerability persist as daily realities.

Yet beyond the statistics and skyscrapers, Philippine cities are celebrated for their rich cultural expressions. Each city is a canvas for vibrant festivals, traditional crafts, historic churches, and tantalizing local cuisines—a testament to a proud heritage that continues to evolve in contemporary plains. These urban hubs not only host spectacular sights and sounds for visitors but also serve as strongholds of Filipino values: resilience, hospitality, community, and faith.

For travelers and curious readers alike, venturing into the cities of the Philippines is a journey through time, tradition, and innovation. Whether you seek the colonial streetscapes of Vigan, the revelry of Bacolod's MassKara Festival, the food adventures of Cebu, or the natural wonders bordering Puerto Princesa, each city presents its own narrative and welcome.

This book is a tribute to the great cities of the Philippines—their pasts, their present challenges, and their promise for the future. Through historical insights and practical guidance, it aims to illuminate the distinct character of each urban center and inspire deeper appreciation and exploration. Welcome to a journey through the cities of the Philippines—a mosaic of places, peoples, and possibilities.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Urban Landscape of the Philippines: An Overview

The Republic of the Philippines, an archipelago nation boasting over 7,000 islands, presents an urban landscape as diverse and dynamic as its geography. Across this vast stretch of land and sea, 149 chartered cities serve as vital centers of commerce, culture, and governance, each contributing a unique thread to the vibrant tapestry of Filipino life. As of July 8, 2023, these urban centers collectively embody the nation's aspirations and challenges, showcasing a fascinating blend of historical influences and modern development.

From the bustling financial districts to serene pilgrimage sites, the cities of the Philippines are far more than mere administrative divisions; they are living repositories of the nation's past, present, and future. Their stories are intertwined with centuries of colonial history, periods of rapid industrialization, and ongoing efforts to build a more sustainable and equitable future. This intricate network of urban areas is a testament to the Filipino spirit of resilience and innovation.

The administrative classification of Philippine cities provides a foundational understanding of their distinct roles and levels of autonomy. These classifications—Highly Urbanized Cities (HUCs), Independent Component Cities (ICCs), and Component Cities (CCs)—reflect varying degrees of self-governance and economic capacity. This tiered system ensures that each city can address the specific needs of its populace while contributing to national development goals.

Highly Urbanized Cities, numbering 33 as of July 8, 2023, stand as autonomous local government units, free from provincial oversight in their legislative processes and not sharing tax revenues with any province. These economic powerhouses are directly supervised by the President of the Philippines and typically boast a minimum population of 200,000 inhabitants and an annual income of at least ₱50 million (in 1991 constant prices). A significant concentration of these HUCs—16, to be precise—are nestled within the sprawling expanse of Metro Manila, underscoring the capital region's dominant economic role.

Independent Component Cities, a more select group with only five members as of July 8, 2023, possess charters that explicitly prevent their residents from participating in provincial elections. This distinction renders them independent of the province in which they are geographically situated. Cotabato, Dagupan, Naga (Camarines Sur), Ormoc, and Santiago are the cities currently holding this classification. Interestingly, some ICCs, like Lucena and Mandaue, whose charters predate 1992 and explicitly

allowed residents to vote and run for provincial offices, continue to retain these rights.

The majority of urban centers fall under the classification of Component Cities, with 108 such entities as of July 8, 2023. These cities do not meet the stringent requirements for HUCs or ICCs and, as such, remain part of their respective provinces. Their local legislation is subject to review by the provincial government, indicating a closer administrative relationship. A municipality can ascend to component city status through an Act of Congress and a ratified plebiscite, provided it meets specific criteria: an average annual income of at least ₱20 million (for the last two consecutive years) and either a contiguous territory of at least 100 square kilometers or a minimum population of 150,000.

The Philippines is undergoing a significant demographic transformation, marked by a rapid increase in its urban population. Currently, more than five out of every ten Filipinos reside in cities, a figure that is projected to soar to an estimated 84% by 2050, effectively doubling the present urban population. This swift urbanization brings forth a dual set of outcomes: immense opportunities for progress alongside considerable challenges that demand strategic foresight and robust solutions.

Economically, urban areas are the undeniable backbone of the Philippine economy, collectively contributing over 70% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This concentration of economic activity fuels demand in sectors like construction and real estate, particularly within burgeoning commercial hubs. The emergence of "mega cities" beyond the confines of Metro Manila—such as Cebu, Davao, and Iloilo—signifies a promising decentralization of economic growth, attracting investments and residents with improved infrastructure, lower living costs, and a generally enhanced quality of life compared to the often-congested capital.

Despite the economic boons, rapid urbanization has exacerbated several critical issues. A national housing backlog of approximately 6.38 million units persists, with 3.62 million informal settler families living in slums due to a scarcity of affordable housing options. This pressing issue highlights the urgent need for comprehensive housing programs and accessible financing.

Infrastructure deficiencies also plague many Philippine cities, manifesting in inadequate transportation networks and insufficient basic amenities like water, electricity, and sanitation. The daily grind of traffic congestion, particularly within Metro Manila, levies a heavy economic toll, costing the economy an estimated ₱3.5 billion per day, or roughly US\$70 million. Without substantial intervention, this cost is projected to escalate even further.

Environmental concerns are another significant byproduct of unchecked urban expansion. Increased air and noise pollution, coupled with frequent flooding due to clogged drainage systems, contribute to various health issues among urban dwellers.

The Philippines' geographical location also makes it highly vulnerable to natural disasters, with an average of 19 to 22 tropical cyclones entering its area of responsibility annually, often bringing devastating impacts.

Furthermore, the benefits of urban economic growth have not been uniformly distributed, leading to persistent challenges of poverty and unemployment for many families residing in cities. Fragmented governance structures for urban development and metropolitan management often impede effective planning and the efficient delivery of essential services. Even in the realm of smart city development, obstacles remain, including securing funding for ICT infrastructure, ensuring system interoperability, bridging the digital divide, and building public trust in data utilization.

Beyond their economic and administrative functions, Philippine cities are vibrant centers of a rich and diverse culture, reflecting a captivating blend of indigenous, Malay, Spanish, and American influences. The Spanish colonial legacy is particularly evident in urban planning, with many cities featuring a central plaza, or *Plaza Mayor*, around which key civic and religious structures are organized. While much of this architectural heritage was tragically lost during World War II, stunning examples of Baroque churches, some recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, continue to stand. These include the San Agustin Church in Manila, Paoay Church in Ilocos Norte, Santa Maria Church in Ilocos Sur, and Santo Tomas de Villanueva Church in Iloilo. The city of Vigan in Ilocos Sur is particularly renowned for its remarkably well-preserved Hispanic architectural style, transporting visitors back to a bygone era.

Festivals, known locally as *barrio fiestas*, are an integral part of urban life, commemorating patron saints and providing occasions for lively dance, music, and feasting. The MassKara Festival in Bacolod, famous for its vibrant masks and street dances, is a prime example of these exuberant celebrations. Filipino culture also thrives in various art forms, encompassing music, dance, theater, painting, and literature. Traditional folk dances, such as the graceful Tinikling and the intricate Singkil, are kept alive and performed by cultural groups like the Bayanihan Philippine National Company for Popular Dance. Traditional crafts, including the exquisite pottery of Pagburnayan in Vigan and the intricate weaving of Inabel, also from Vigan, continue to be actively practiced, showcasing the enduring artistry of the Filipino people.

The culinary scene across Philippine cities is a delicious reflection of its diverse influences, with bustling street food stalls offering local favorites alongside a growing presence of international and local fast-food chains. Underlying this vibrant urban life are deeply rooted Filipino family values and societal obligations, with a strong emphasis on respect for elders and community solidarity.

Philippine cities also serve as crucial gateways to the nation's breathtaking natural attractions, while offering unique urban experiences of their own. Manila, the capital, presents a compelling blend of history and modernity, inviting exploration of iconic

sites like the walled city of Intramuros, the expansive Rizal Park, and the vibrant energy of its Chinatown. Davao City, located on the southern island of Mindanao, is celebrated for its commitment to eco-tourism and sustainability, boasting attractions such as Mount Apo, the country's highest peak, and the Philippine Eagle Center. It is also a burgeoning tech hub, with a strong focus on digital transformation.

Cebu City, often affectionately called the "Queen City of the South," is a historic and regional powerhouse in the Visayas. It captivates visitors with its lively festivals, Spanish-era architecture, and a dynamic fusion of tradition and contemporary urban living. Cebu is also steadily evolving into a significant technology hotspot. Further north, Baguio City, the "Summer Capital of the Philippines," offers a refreshing escape with its cool climate, picturesque mountain vistas, and a thriving arts scene. Tagaytay, situated near Manila, provides stunning panoramic views of Taal Volcano and Lake, making it a popular weekend getaway. And finally, the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Vigan, with its impeccably preserved Spanish colonial architecture and cobblestone streets, offers a living testament to a rich historical past.

Looking ahead, the Philippines is actively embracing the "smart city" concept to enhance urban functionality, sustainability, and livability. This initiative involves leveraging technology and innovation to create urban areas that are more responsive to the needs of both their inhabitants and the environment. Cities such as Manila, Cebu, Davao, and Clark are leading the charge in implementing smart community solutions, alongside others like Malabon City, Mandaue City, San Fernando City (Pampanga), Tagum City, Cauayan City, and Tuguegarao City.

Government programs like "Build Better More" are strategically designed to bolster infrastructure development, focusing on improving physical connectivity through expressways and roads, and significantly enhancing broadband connectivity across the nation. These concerted efforts aim to decentralize growth beyond the traditional economic center of Metro Manila, fostering new mixed-use and township developments to alleviate urban pressures. While challenges persist in terms of funding, infrastructure readiness, and public adoption of new technologies, the unwavering commitment from both national government agencies and local government units signals a promising future for the development of smart, sustainable, and inclusive cities throughout the Philippines.

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