



# Samdhana Institute Opens Manila Office at Manila Observatory

Samdhana Institute in the Philippines has opened its Manila office, located on the 2nd floor of the Manila Observatory, inside the campus of Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU).

The blessing and opening took place on April 12, 2024. The blessing was officiated by Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarín, SJ, former University President of ADMU, and current Director of Manila Observatory. Fr. Jett, as he is more popularly called, said that the kind of work Samdhana does embodies the integration of science and spirituality. His brief reflection connotes that we recognize and respect spirituality in different forms and expressions, and it is all-embracing, especially in our line of work with indigenous peoples and various groups. Many of the audience appreciated his message and prayer that, though we (and communities in the frontline) may get tired in this kind of work, it is the affirming kind of tiredness, because we fulfill our spirituality through the labor of our hands and hearts.

Mr. Jerome Montemayor, Executive Director of the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE) welcomed Samdhana through a message. He affirmed that it is a very good opportunity to be 'neighbors' because organizations such as ours that have common goals in protecting and promoting the environment need to work closer and better together. There is much potential to be able to bridge the support to Indigenous peoples and other grassroots groups who directly depend on and work for the environment. Mr. Montemayor also mentioned that FPE, being located in Quezon City, is also confronted by other kinds of environmental challenges like urban biodiversity. Again, the opportunities for collaboration and learning from one another institutionally is something that we look forward to.

'Shared inspiration' - this is the message of Fr. Pete Montellano, from the Indigenous People's Apostolate of the Prelature of Infanta. Fr. Pete is the former Head of Save Sierra Madre Movement. Fr. Pete said that Samdhana's support to Indigenous Peoples in their continuing struggle gives inspiration to them who are also supporting the community. On our part, the communities who are fighting against the threats and oppression they face also teach us what courage is.

Director of the National Organic Agriculture Program (NOAP) of the Department of Agriculture, Dir. Bernadette San Juan, also welcomed Samdhana through a message. She looked forward to engaging with more farming communities and groups through Samdhana, as we have been building up our support for agro-ecology based farming with partner communities.





Mr. Filomeno Sta. Ana III, the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of Samdhana in the Philippines, said in his address, that there was a long deliberation before the final decision to hold office in the Manila Observatory. However, being there proved to be quite fitting in the end, since we are called to reflect on the work that is being done in the Observatory. The act and power of observation helps Samdhana in responding appropriately to the challenging situations that arise with communities, in such a manner that best engages and empowers the people involved.

Atty. Antonio La Vina, also a member of Samdhana's Board of Trustees, and a prominent figure of Manila Observatory, especially in the public governance and climate change policy work, said that he hopes that Samdhana can collaborate more, not just with their programs, but also with the other NGOs who are holding offices in the same building, such as Haribon Foundation and KLIMA.



The opening was graced by institutional partners such as Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center, The Asia Foundation, Mahalina Foundation and Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities. The Mr. Randy Cirio, the new National President of PAKISAMA and Ms. Jaymie Reyes, the Senior Policy Officer - Political and Human Rights/Law at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands also attended the event. It was a delight to welcome student representatives from Miriam College and ADMU. Samdhana Fellows and other friends were also present for the opening.

The Samdhana Manila office will be a hub for networking with key institutions in the Philippines' civil society, and with national agencies as well as Embassies. We also hope to be able to provide a contact point for community and grassroots partners in other provinces in Luzon, and with national networks, to continue supporting them in national policy work.

