

Since No One is Superman Yet Everyone is a Hero
Immensity of Achieved Citizens Participation: Looking Through the Gawad
Kalinga Initiative
Ms. Charybel De Ocampo Magbuo *

Who could forget the dreadful event that occurred on 10 July 2000, when the collapse of the garbage mountain in Payatas, Quezon City, Philippines claimed over 200 lives, injured more than 535, left around 350¹ still missing and, worst of all, left 300 families homeless.² As a 14 year old individual, I reckon that what I said when I heard the news over the television was, "if they are in their right mind, why settle in those kind of places?" Now, however, as a mature individual majoring in Development Studies, aware of the statistics that the Philippines has been accumulating in terms of poverty and social development, I see that there are sensible reasons why Filipino people are living in slums, or even in unsecured settlements. The poverty rate in the Philippines is an enormous and alarming 40%. As of 2005, the population of the Philippines was 85.24 million³ and continuing to grow at a rate of 2.36%, one of the highest population growth rates in the world. Over 40% of the population is estimated to live on less than US\$2.00 per day.⁴ Poverty is not only about scarcity, it also requires accountability in terms of human deprivation, development, and quality of life. Enough statistics! There are already too many of them; the question is "What solution can I offer, after all?"

In 2004, when he was the Director-General of the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) of the Philippines, Romulo Neri uttered,

This time I'm using Gawad Kalinga as my benchmark for all the projects in housing. And in fact I'm twisting arms with the World Bank and ADB now to use Gawad Kalinga as their model not only in the Philippines but for the rest of the world.⁵

What then is Gawad Kalinga?

Gawad Kalinga (GK), which literally translated in English means "to give care," holds itself up as "an alternative solution to the blatant problem of poverty not just in the Philippines, but in the world."⁶ GK, the housing arm of the Philippines-based Couples for Christ, a Catholic community organization, came to existence in 1995 under the leadership of Tony Meloto, the driving force behind GK's vision of a "Philippines without slums." Its approach is integrated, holistic and sustainable. It has a concrete action plan to rebuild the nation by harnessing the best of the Filipino, which is faith and patriotism. GK 777 envisions 700,000 homes in 7,000 communities in 7 years. GK 777 was formally launched on 4 October 2003 and is working to deliver its projects by 2010 (footnote 6). GK no longer just works with the poor, but instead has evolved into a group that

* Ms. Charybel De Ocampo Magbuo is a citizen of the Philippines. She is a student at De La Salle University, Dasmariñas.

¹ Action by Churches Together (ACT). 2000. 27 July. *Assistance to Flood & Storm Victims*. Available: http://act-intl.org/appeals/appeals_2000/ASPH03.html

² Urban Poor Asia: Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. 2000. 11 July. *News from PAYATAS*. Available: http://www.achr.net/payatas_t.htm

³ U.S. Department of State. 2006. *Background note: Philippines*. October. Available: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2794.htm>

⁴ *Asian Economic News*. 2005. 18 January. Scope: Philippines must tackle its exploding population: economists. Available: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDP/is_2005_Jan_18/ai_n8704054

⁵ Gawad Kalinga. 2004. 25 June. *GK in the News: Sharing of Hon Romulo Neri*. Available: http://www.gawadkalinga.org/gk_news/inthenews/test_neri.htm

⁶ Gawad Kalinga. *What is GK?* Available: <http://www.gawadkalinga.org/whatisgk.htm>

engages in the “work of nation building.”⁷ GK believes that “not one organization has the capability to rebuild the country, not even the government” (footnote 7). GK assists by tapping the citizens, empowering them and seeking their participation in building integrated, holistic and sustainable communities.

GK’s conviction is “that no one is too poor that he cannot share, that no one is too rich that he cannot care” (footnote 7). GK projects move primarily with the efforts, support and heroism of thousands of volunteers, partners, and beneficiaries who commit to making its vision a reality. GK hopes to achieve community empowerment, massive mobilization of volunteerism, and partnership in nation building. GK’s work is stewardship and uplifting the dignity of the poor by building their capacity to respond to opportunities and enabling them to reach their highest potential. That is the reason why GK builds “brightly-painted homes, beautiful parks and playgrounds, colorful gardens and clean surroundings” for people, because such surroundings help to “revitalize their capacity to hope and dream” (footnote 7). GK ascertains that heroes are ordinary people “who choose to make sacrifices for the greater good” (footnote 7).

GK has five basic programs: shelter, education, health, livelihood and community development (footnote 7). The most basic task of providing houses is handled by the “Tatag,” which means build, program. Other than housing, GK also builds other physical structures such as pathways, drainage systems, water facilities, schools, livelihood centers, multi-purpose halls and clinics in every GK site (footnote 7).

In terms of educating the youth of GK communities, there are three specific programs with distinct objectives. The “Sibol” program gives pre-school children, aging from three to six, “values-based education.” In “Sagip,” which means save, street children from seven to thirteen years of age are “given tutorials and trained in sports and creative arts to help them discover their talents and potentials.” Lastly SIGA, which is an acronym for Serving in God’s Army, provides youths with scholarships to pursue higher education. Also, through SIGA,

Youth offenders and juvenile delinquents are rehabilitated without committing them to institutions, and they are integrated into the social mainstream as productive citizens (footnote 7).

Health aspects are covered by the “Lusog” program. According to the Website,

Parents are taught the values of proper diet and nutrition. The health profile of every family beneficiary is also monitored and every problem is given proper medical attention (footnote 7).

Sustaining the source of income of the community members is duly managed by the “Sikap.” Through it,

Livelihood skills are provided, capital and materials are furnished, and the market for products produced is also provided. Food self-sufficiency is encouraged by putting up vegetable gardens, urban agriculture, quail raising, tilapia and hito culture (footnote 7).

The best “mechanism for sustainable development” that can be found in these GK communities is the “Kapitbahayan” or neighborhood program. Under it,

⁷ Couples for Christ. *Gawad Kalinga*. Available: http://www.cfcglobal.org.ph/gawad_kalinga/gawad_kalinga.htm

A neighborhood association is established to inculcate the values of stewardship and accountability, team effort and cooperation, unity and community spirit...It institutionalizes the principle of helping the poor and help themselves (footnote 7).

Furthermore, GK has started to reach its vision of providing a solution to and eradicating poverty not only in the Philippines but also in the world. On 26 August 2006, a GK Congress and Concert was held in Jakarta, Indonesia. The event featured presentations from the two GK sites in Jakarta. Among the people who attended the event was Indonesia's Secretary of the Ministry of Housing, Noer Soetriono. GK Indonesia plans to build 2,000 GK Villages by year 2010. GK's Meloto said,

Gawad Kalinga is the gift of the Filipino to the poor of the world. Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Cambodia will show the way for the Asian region, while India (a sub-continent), Africa and Central America will be the future GK continents.⁸

How do my hands get soaked with the Gawad Kalinga works? Being a student of De La Salle University, Dasmariñas, which is tagged in the Philippines as the "University of the Rich," I am one of the minorities who struggles to secure a scholarship slot every semester in exchange for good academic standing. During my sixth semester, Development Studies students from the university were sent out to conduct our internship. Instead of the expected air-conditioned offices our destination was the GK Site in Adlas, Silang, Cavite. Our tasks were to get into the community, profile the residents, learn their lifestyles and come out with pivotal project proposals. There were a number of times that we climbed up the GK Adlas site to gather the necessary data. We learned that this GK site was born through the efforts of GK Provincial Coordinator 2004, Jimmy Tamio, Captain Nestor Mendoza, and Councilor Ambrocio Labayan of Barangay Adlas. Through the interest of the local government of Adlas, the MOLDEX Estate, a 2,250 square meter lot occupied by tenants, was offered to the Provincial Coordinator who was searching for a site where GK could be established. The said estate was donated by MOLDEX Realty Corporation to the Municipality of Silang, in particular to Barangay Adlas, Silang, Cavite. From the donations and pledges received, the construction of the first six houses started on 12 June 2004.⁹

Through community profiling, we university students were able to come up with project proposals that will be used for the GK Adlas site. The site will have a total population of 102 residents or 26 families, most of whom are Catholics. The primary livelihood activities will be vending or working in construction. The number of school-aged youths is growing and in order to provide them with education, a sustainable source of income is indispensable. In this sense, the livelihood project proposal was given much more importance. The "livelihood cooperative piggery project" formulated by the university students was evaluated and will be submitted to the Provincial Coordinator for approval and funding (footnote 9).

However, the GK initiative cannot single-handedly approach and address poverty in the Philippines and in the world. The responsibility of the government has always been so broad that particularities of holistic human development have always been neglected. Providing housing facilities for the poor is not enough, because if people do not have the capability to survive in the new environment into which they are placed,

⁸ Montelibano, J.M. 2006. 4 September. *GK ROCKS Indonesia*. Available: http://gawadkalinga.org/gk_news/gk_news_view.php?id=0609-006

⁹ Research conducted by Development Studies Students of De La Salle University, Dasmariñas, Batch 2007; Second Semester 2005.

eventually they will be back to the slums; maybe even beside the pile of rubbish that gave them the food to live.

Primary movers of poverty eradication internationally have always approached governments in conducting their undertakings in the belief that the concern of the people can be addressed best by the government. Ironically, the government is helpless and the power is in the people to act for the betterment of themselves and others. There are various initiatives from the local citizens and interest groups that are closest to the people. While GK is one of those groups, they all need assistance. Financial assistance can come from not only national organizations but international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, United Nations-Habitat and many others. Human development groups should change their partners in delivering their mission from the government to these effectual organizations. The Government has worked for many years with no changes made. It is now the epoch of the aware citizens. Definitely, however, even GK volunteers with the help of international organizations are not enough to change the face of the earth, which leads to the question: where will aware citizens come from?

I do not have the experience of being well-off in life, but I also have not suffered as badly as some have. Experiencing first hand the situation of real people moved me to understand fully the essence of the field I am studying. Continuous pursuit for development is vital. Someone should think of and formulate a plan of action for the economy or to improve the country's position in the battle against poverty. Nonetheless, more people should immerse themselves into the real world and understand closely how others are suffering. One can only understand if s/he will get near these people. A citizen's participation in promoting any societal concern is most unlikely to be achieved if recognition of the role of individuals has not yet been attained. The role of an individual in society cannot be fully seen unless there is awareness. Different institutions play crucial roles in awakening the citizens to participate for the call against all human dilemmas. As for students, the role of the school is very essential. The knowledge that is gained from classrooms should not result in stagnant theories that will not materialize. As for volunteers, the role of nongovernmental organizations will determine whether the spark of awareness in each individual will last, with or without primal change. Lastly, as an individual, the role of the heart is the most important factor. If only we try to live by GK's value of "less for self, more for others, enough for all" (footnote 6) then change will start from every one of us. Idealistic as it may sound, GK proves that a world without slums is within reach; proud yet humbly I say, "I am part of it."