

Transforming Urban Shanties to Livable Homes

Long, uneven wooden planks pieced together and built precariously atop murky, stagnant water are a common site in the inner sanctuaries of more than 1.4 million informal settlers concentrated mostly in Metro Manila.

With the unabated influx of rural migrants to the city in search of a better life, the living standards of urban poor communities have worsened. It is estimated that 35% of Metro Manila's population live in slum areas with inadequate access to potable water, high unemployment rates, substandard homes, and poor sanitation, to say the least. We have often heard of tragedies in recent months where these poor, unfortunate souls were wiped out by community calamities such as the freaky fire accidents as in Baseco area and landslides in dumpsite communities.

Recognizing that the growing problem of urban poverty should also be supported by the business sector, the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP) with the support of the Government of Japan through the Japanese Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR) Program being administered by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and in partnership with HUDCC, launched the Strategic Private Sector Partnerships for Urban Poverty Reduction in Metro Manila or STEP-UP program last year.

SYNERGY PERSONIFIED IN STEP-UP: PROMOTING SELF-RELIANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Although skeptics may think that this approach nurtures a dole-out mentality, such is not the case. Sustainability is ensured through helping community leaders fend for themselves. It was made clear to the community leaders and members of the People's Organizations that PBSP and its corporate partners would not be there to help forever thus they had to learn to stand on their own. "Our role is to help people help themselves", says Mrs. Ma. Luisa Perez-Rubio, President of PBSP.

For communities to sustain their initial gains, local people's organizations have to persevere and work together in order, putting in their share to make the program a success. As a policy, sweat equity is required of the residents for the construction of roads and multi-purpose centers, while mandatory loan repayments are instituted for the micro-finance fund to assist women entrepreneurs. Such a comprehensive strategy is key to the program's sustainability and in building self-reliance and responsibility among beneficiaries.

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Culling lessons from the rich experience of the NCR-ARM Program, PBSP applied an

enhanced approach in a follow-on initiative. In 1997, similar depressed communities were adopted in Taguig and Muntinlupa. This time, however, focus was placed on establishing multi-sectoral partnerships. This meant working closely with the business community, local government units, people's organizations, the academe and various non-government organizations, bringing all sectors of society to work together

Today, rather than just being looked upon as a funding source for projects or stand alone events and activities, companies like Fort Bonifacio Development Corporation in Taguig and Monark in Libis, Quezon City are engaged more broadly in crafting the municipal development plans. Local community leaders have been given a seat at the discussion and negotiating table, especially during decision-making on land tenure and community site development issues. Local government and national line agencies, on the other hand, recognize the importance of participation, consultation and genuine partnership in the delivery of much needed services to their constituents.

PBSP has also realized that it is efficient in achieving its goals by working with like-minded not-for-profit organizations already on site. The idea is not to replicate what other NGOs are doing, but rather enhance and complement each other's efforts. As a result, on-going housing construction projects are being implemented in partnership with the Habitat for Humanity chapters in Taguig and Muntinlupa. This scheme maximizes the resources among partners.

SCALING UP with STEP-UP

With HUDCC as the executing agency and PBSP as the implementing agency, the STEP-UP Program is a corporate-led strategy, which employs an innovative integrated urban development approach. \$ 3.6 million US dollars has been allocated by JFPR-ADB for the improvement of roads and drainage, community infrastructure, house upgrading, livelihood assistance and crisis management training. PBSP has committed to raise an equivalent of \$ 3.33 million US dollars in financial and in-kind counterpart assistance from civil society organizations partners and mainly from the private sector.

As Michael Lindfield, a Senior Housing specialist in ADB points out, "We have initiated several pilot activities, the latest being the PBSP program that aims to promote corporate involvement in a more meaningful way, with strategic, focused and measurable impact on the lives of the urban poor." He adds, "while the government's community mortgage program has enabled numerous urban poor communities in Metro Manila to secure land tenure –many have remained mired in poverty and suffer a degraded quality of life due to the lack of access to basic services, livelihood opportunities and overall community development."

In three years, STEP-UP aims to reduce poverty and improve the living conditions of 5,823 urban poor families in 23 communities from nine cities in Metro Manila, namely Malabon, Caloocan, Mandaluyong, Manila, Marikina, Quezon City, Pasig, Taguig and Muntinlupa.

As in PBSP's previous program, STEP-UP is a convergence model among many stakeholders. However, an added feature of the program is the risk reduction and management. Since most of these communities are prone to floods, fire, and other disasters, the program helps develop people's capabilities in preventing and responding to disasters, as well as providing basic equipment for disaster mitigation. The aim is to protect and preserve the infrastructure and lives in these communities from onslaught.

The program will be anchored on building and strengthening strategic public-private partnerships. Led by a Business Consensus Group, employee volunteers and professionals such as architects, engineers, contractors and designers share their time, talents and expertise in drawing up plans keeping in mind the structural soundness complementing them with aesthetic values.

Regarding the vital role of partnering with NGOs, Mr. Pedro Roxas, PBSP Board of Trustee and CEO of Central Azucarrera Don Pedro says, "What is important is that we don't duplicate what others are doing. We need to tap the expertise of and ensure that our support leverages and complements what they are already doing".

Since CMP sites have been selected, revolving funds for housing improvement is made available. The loan per single family may range anywhere between ₱ 15,000 – ₱ 70,000, depending on the need. The private sector is encouraged to participate through housing materials donation and/or technical assistance for architectural housing designs. One-time grant assistance is given to the communities for the construction of water facilities, drainage, roads, re-blocking and other infrastructure needed in the community, such as multi-purpose centers, which are used as day care centers, and training centers. A revolving fund is also be established to provide loans to qualified micro-entrepreneurs with the principle that once they are economically empowered, repayments for home improvements will follow.

Eight months into the program, a lot may have been done but much more have yet to be achieved when looking at the scope and scale of this urban blight.

"Businesses and people who want to help need not go out of their way. They can start by look at its core strengths and identify any of the nine municipalities, and it should find a way to engage and help in STEP-UP, said Mr. Juan B. Santos, Chairman of Nestle Philippines and PBSP Board of Trustee.

A collective effort and a new mindset is called for to make STEP-UP work. True. As ADB's Lindfield sums up, "the project links the underprivileged to opportunities by providing them the wherewithal to help themselves and with contacts and role models." Come to think of it, STEP-UP might just be what this country needs.

STEP-UP, after all, transforms urban shanties into livable homes with healthy human beings contributing to the betterment of their community and their society.

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