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The Philippines: Fixing a Divided Nation

The Philippine's future lies within its children and if more focus is not put on providing them with the best education possible, then the Philippines will never experience strong upward social movement. All citizens, with proper attention, would have the chance to be privileged. However, as it stands right now, the Philippines is full of children who may or may not have parents, children who live with their five or six siblings in a shanty town surrounded by dozens of families just like them or children who have no one but themselves to provide for and keep company with. It is the country's responsibility to take care of their own by providing easy access to quality education and, subsequently, proper work. President Macapagal-Arroyo and her government have a huge crisis on their hands. If a child grows up with a hardened heart, the heart of the country, in turn, becomes hardened. Therefore, one must be compassionate towards their own if they want to live in a country where its citizens are happy.

The Philippines is a melting pot of the elite and the dejected. Former President Marcos was speaking of his own country and in 1975 he said, "The Philippines is a nation divided against itself, divided between urban and rural, rich and poor, majorities and minorities, privileged and underprivileged" (Steinberg 36). Since 1975, not much has changed. It is a land where western culture is slowly creeping in; historical architecture is clogged with modern high-rise skyscrapers next to houses made out of tarp and cardboard. The streets are clogged with imported cars taking passengers to American

chain stores and filled with ravaged children who have not eaten in days. It is a place where the wealthy are filthy rich and the poor are dirt-poor. For a land with ever-evolving statistics on poverty and education, the future does not look bright; however, with the proper attention to the plight of their own people, changes could be made. If education programs were implemented, this current generation would be the only one to feel any hardship. With attention, the Philippines would no longer be the country where the rich are filthy rich and the poor are dirt poor. They could all be privileged.

The stark contrast of living conditions in the Philippines is staggering. Take the capital city of Manila, for example. Manila is a city of gleaming skyscrapers and superhighways. At one extreme, there are the world-class hotels, many built in the mid-1970s by President Marcos. These ultramodern palaces charge a daily rate that is in excess of the annual income of some Filipinos. Metro Manila is also home to the most extensive mall and shopping network in the country. The malls were built on an island in the Manila Bay and are actually equated to “an extraordinary new city named Makati” (Steinberg 31). Steinberg writes that this new city within a city was built by a powerful family in Manila, the Zobel de Ayala family, and is a prime example of private entrepreneurship and monopoly. He further points out that virtually all of the insurance, banking, communications, advertising and political offices are based in Manila. Also, because of all the business, the population of Manila has doubled since 1970. Steinberg finally suggests that Filipinos are moving to Manila because of the thought that their families will have a better opportunity and a greater chance of success.

All it takes is one look down an alley, however, to see the other Manila. At the other extreme are the miles of slums, copious tin huts and homes that stretch out over

open sewers. Cars choke the roadways (and probably pedestrians, as well, with their fumes). As Steinberg relays, “The juxtaposition of its pathetic shacks of tin and cardboard without water or sanitation and its elegant suburbs with private guards and fancy clubs is a visible example of the confusion that underlies so much of Third World ‘development’” (34). The world views third world development as taking the poorest countries and making them rich. What is confusing when looking at the Philippines is that all the major cities are building more and more in an effort to change their third world status, but are not using their funds to first fix their poverty problems.

Poverty also abounds in the countryside, which “contains a disproportionate share of the poor” (“Poverty”). A Filipino study collected by the US Library of Congress reports that half of the Philippines’ poorest families lived in the countryside in the 1980s. The study reported that fishermen, forestry workers and those who did not own land were the poorest of the poor and that these occupations made up half of the households.

This poverty remains the central development issue in the Philippines. Henderson asserts that the main cause and problem for the dire straits of the Filipino people is a vicious circle. Due to insufficient funds, they are unable to provide adequate nutrition for their families, resulting in malnutrition. This condition leaves Filipinos weak and more susceptible to sickness. It is harder for them to work, harder for them to make money, leaving them in poverty and unable to buy food. Further, families use their children as a means of income by having them beg in the streets or work from sunup to sundown. It is not often that a parent could spare their child long enough for a proper education, despite the fact that “Filipinos have a deep regard for education, which they view as a primary avenue for upward social and economic movement” (“Education”). They may hold

education in high esteem but it is still something that is hard to come by. Schooling in the Philippines is generally free, but you cannot attend without the proper uniform or books, which are expensive. If families cannot spare their children long enough from begging in the streets just to go to school, they definitely cannot pay to send them there. However, without an education, these children cannot get a job and therefore resort to begging in the streets to put food on the table. It is a problem that makes a full circle, with seemingly no end in sight. This scary scenario is the Filipino norm.

The Philippines has one of the most unequal income distributions in the world. Some 42 percent of Filipino families in the urban areas and 58 percent of those in rural areas lived below the poverty line in 1999. And, according to the Asian Development Bank report, approximately 30 million Filipinos live in “absolute poverty, the sense of having an income that does not enable them to satisfy their own basic needs” (Asian 3). Not only are the numbers of poor staggering, they are growing. The Philippines has the fastest growing population of any country in the whole world.

In his book, David Steinberg writes that with an annual population increase of 2.8%, the society cannot increase the individual standard of living until the number of births declines. He writes that President Arroyo’s staunch Roman-Catholic faith and close association with the church have made her unwilling to fund family-planning efforts; she feels that we as humans have no right to control a God-given gift like having children and a growing family. Steinberg relays that even if she were to reverse herself, the next 15 million Filipino workers are already born and will enter the labor force at approximately 1 million per year. The 15 million Filipinos defined as being a core poverty group are increasing by 400,000 a year. Further, the population, 60 million now, will reach 100

million in the next thirty years (Steinberg 34). “The country’s too-rapid population growth is magnifying the strain on limited budgetary resources” writes Clarence Henderson. The rapidly growing numbers are jeopardizing the quality of social services that the country does offer. Basic education, access to health care, and other economic amenities are being stretched to the limit. However, there is one institution that is not being used to its fullest and that is the education system.

For most of the nation, the possibility of basic education and literacy was given hope by the educational decree of 1863 that called for the establishment of local schools in every section of the country. While well intended, the decree said nothing of funding and did not create a budget. Though technically legally binding, the effect of the decree has been limited. Only students in the largest of cities attend classes regularly, but even then, the number of students are few. The teachers are often untrained and usually have no supplies with which to conduct class. So, by law, education is free and compulsory for children from ages seven through twelve, but very few are able to take advantage of this amenity.

The Annual Poverty Indicator Survey shows that in 2002, 51.9% of Filipino families had any number of children aged 6 to 12 and 91.2% of those children were enrolled in elementary school (Erica). It also shows that the percentage dropped to 42% of children aged 13-16 in high school. The same survey shows that 68.4% of families had children aged 17+, but only 12.8% of those children had been through both elementary and high school. These statistics show that the effort to keep children in school past 7th grade simply is not being made. Unless families find a way to spare their children from

the streets or unless the government spends more time (and consequently, money) on education programs, nothing in the Philippines will ever change.

Filipino parents are keenly aware that a quality education is crucial to their children's future, but it is not always possible, especially for families living in rural areas. It is entirely possible that children from rural towns may only have access to an elementary school. Or, if their town has no elementary school, it simply is not feasible to commute every day to larger towns. These are the main reasons for the serious depletion of children from one grade to the next. Using statistics from the 1995-1996 academic year in Culture and Customs of the Philippines, we see that 11,504,816 children were enrolled in the nation's 36,800 elementary schools. The number of high schools, also called secondary schools, drops significantly to 6,205. The decline in the number of institutions aids in the decline in the number of students. In 1995 only 4,883,507 students went on to high school (Rodell 202). Rodell analyzes these statistics by pointing out that only 42.4% of the nations' children continue from elementary to high school. He further writes that this drop off becomes even more drastic when institutions of higher learning are factored into the equation. Sadly, looking at all these statistics, we see that an elementary student entering grade one has only a 2.9% chance of getting a college degree.

Of those 2.9% of college graduates, the most serious problems concerns the number of students who do attain a degree but then cannot find a job commensurate with their educational skills. This ultimately hurts the Philippines because "If properly utilized, these trained personnel could facilitate economic development, but when left idle or forced to take jobs beneath their qualifications, this group could be a major source

of discontent” (“Education”). A college graduate’s inability to attain a decent job post-graduation does not encourage others to pursue higher education. If a young adult with an education degree is not given the capacity to use their skills and are still left to the streets, a high school student is going to see no reason to put forth effort for a degree.

Not only is the problem of education a major one, there are also serious health problems that could keep children out of school. According to the International Handbook of Public Health, nearly one-half of all reported deaths in the Philippines are among infants and children through age four, and about one-half of the accelerated death rate is among those five or younger and is related to malnutrition (Baltazar 265). The Handbook shows that in 1998, 36 in 100 preschool age-children were underweight and 4 in every 10 children were affected with iron deficiency anemia. It continues by showing that 3 in every 10 children have low to deficient vitamin A levels, as well as having moderate to severe iodine deficiency disorders. These are just the cold hard facts and they only pertain to children, not even adults. Improper education and inadequate medical attention leaves one curious as to just what the Filipino government is doing with their time and resources.

The Food and Nutrition Research Institute did another survey in 2003 and it concluded that problems were worsening instead of improving. Thus, they came up with “The Philippine Food Fortification Program.” By this, chemically engineered “healthy” foods will be provided instead of “normal” foods. The food fortification program is the “addition of . . . micronutrients such as Vitamin A, iron and/or Iodine to food, whether or not they are normally contained in the food” (Food and Nutrition). With this, the Food and Nutrition Research Institute hope to better the statistics for their 2008 survey and to

give the people of the Philippines, namely the children, a better chance for a fuller life. Not only are the children hungry, they are hurting.

Open Arms International Ministries, based out of Fayetteville, North Carolina has a special adoption program especially for children in the cities of the Philippines. As of March, 2006, they have ten children that they care for. Thankfully, the program is growing. For a monthly fee, O.A.I.M. provides children with funding for school, a uniform, books, food and vitamins as well as a home. One of their little girls is Emely Maghinay. She is nine years old and lives in the capital city of Manila. Her mother died upon giving birth to her youngest sibling, of which she has nine. Her father left the family soon thereafter for another woman and severely neglected his children. Emely and her siblings have long been dependent on their oldest brother, Rene, for food. Eventually, her father was killed. All ten of the Maghinay children are now orphaned and have nothing. The only hope they have is adoption, either in the country or by a sponsorship program in the United States, for food, shelter, clothing, and a proper education. Luckily for Emely, she has a sponsor. Sadly, her friend Nichole, does not.

Nichole is a seven year old orphan who lives in a rural mountain town. She was born without knowing her parents and was left to her grandmother after her mother gave birth to her. Upon moving in with her grandmother and uncle, she experienced severe maltreatment. There is no love in her life. Nichole does not even have a legitimate last name, as her grandmother does not accept her as one of the family. The only hope Nichole has is through a local pastor. He has taken Nichole into his home, given her his last name and let her pick out what day she wanted her birthday to be on. He has provided a temporary home for her but, having done this for ten children already, he

cannot provide much. Now, multiply Nichole and Emely's stories by millions, and we can begin to understand just how big of a problem the Philippines is facing.

There are efforts being made to make the streets of the Philippines better. The Filipino government has mainly targeted street children and their parents as a vulnerable group, rightfully so. In 1994 the Department of Interior and Local Government, with funding assistance from the Australian Government Overseas Aid Program, embarked on a five year project called "The Street Children Nutrition and Education Program."

Because families generally cannot spare the precious working time their children bring to the family, the children miss out on an education. With this in mind, The Street Children Nutrition and Education Program uses food as an incentive to go to school. In this way, children can bring home food after a day at school, instead of bringing home food after a day begging in the streets. A non-profit organization in Manila uses buses to gather children from specified street corners throughout the city at seven o'clock every morning. They are brought to a central location in Manila called The Fortress. Spread out over a large grassy park are tables and chairs; the children will spend the day with literacy, arithmetic, numeracy and what the teachers call a value formation class. At the end of the day each child will take home 1.5kg of rice as an incentive to return (Commonwealth).

This is an example of how the project works in one area of the Philippines. In other areas, children participate in job training including some activities that are income based. These specially funded programs actually pass on money, instead of rice, to the students for their work. The aim is to increase their skills for a future job they will hold, both by honing in on labor skills as well as developing smart financial management. There is even a subset of this project designed for the parents. Using the same rice

incentive as their children, parents learn skills that affect the rest of their lives: the major importance of health care and education for their children, proper care and nutrition for their families, as well as values and morals and the importance of keeping their children off the streets. For the whole family, the hope is that there will be an improved lifestyle.

These education and lifestyle programs have grown past the initial 5-year plan. In the past eleven years, “6,100 children have significantly lowered their time spent on the streets by 20% or more, and more than 2,600 children have been drawn from the streets completely” (Commonwealth). The Filipino government needs to focus on implementing more programs like these. They are obviously successful; there are no drawbacks. Not only are both child and parent getting an education, they are not losing out on the food they need to survive. With proper funding, this one single program could take off and that one program could be the difference in either a single life, or an entire generation.

However, the geography of the Philippines takes the biggest strain on implementing these education programs. The Philippines is made up of thousands of islands that make a 30,000 square kilometer expansion in the South China Sea. There are two main islands, Luzon and Mindanao, consisting of 65% of Filipino landmass, but there are still 32% of Filipino children living on islands (Frontline). It is harder to access these islands and consequently even harder to have strong educational programs. Because of the sheer number of small islands and the government’s hard time maintaining the few programs they do have, the possibility of implementing still more programs is unlikely.

Food for the Hungry (F.F.T.H.) is another important program that has been helping the Philippines since 1981. As of 2006, they have three main programs implemented and thriving. The first is a Child Development Program. With this, F.F.T.H.

has determined that the problem is that “children are the most affected and vulnerable group in all aspects of poverty such as diseases, suffering and injustice” (Food for). They have determined to sponsor as many individual children as humanly possible, to completely address their needs in every aspect ranging from education to faith to medical to recreational. The Child Development Program, in helping each child with education, obviously melts over into their next program: Extended Education. F.F.T.H. provides funding to pay for uniforms, books, school supplies and tuition fees (if any). Their goal is to “equip students for future employment through vocational training or special advanced training.” The final program that Food for the Hungry offers is probably the most important. They offer a Micro-Enterprise Development program because people lack education about finances and need help starting or maintaining a business. These sorts of programs are proof that people in the Philippines do care about their country and their future. Unfortunately, the people who do care are the people with the least amount of power. The people who really need to start caring are members of the government.

Filipino Presidents in particular have been drawn from the ranks of the wealthy and privileged. They do not know what it means to be poor and hungry. Even if their hearts are in the right place (which is not all that common), well-photographed visits to squatter areas are simply not the answer to problems. The Philippines has had 10 presidents in the last 100 years, 80% of which have been through college doctorate and/or law school, working for prominent law firms in the city of Manila. Or some, like current president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, just ask Daddy (former Filipino presidents) for help (Philippine).

What aid comes down to is proper representation. An American best knows what it means to be an American. An orphan in the Philippines knows best what it means to be an orphan in the Philippines. They oftentimes also know the best solution to the problem. In trying to solve the problems of an orphan, listen to an orphan. Maybe one of these days, if an orphan is given the best education possible, he or she could be President.

A child does not ask to be born. A child does not choose to enter this world. They are given life and do not deserve anything less than the best. My favorite thing about growing up was sleeping in on Saturday mornings and getting to watch cartoons, going to summer camp, getting a puppy for my 5th birthday and being spoiled beyond belief by my grandparents. I was raised with nothing but love and I appreciate all I have. The children in the Philippines know nothing of what it means to do something because they want to and will gain pleasure from it. Their lives have been dictated by work and hunger, things they did not ask for and do not deserve. Something must be done. Compassion must be felt for these people. The Filipino government has resources that are not being used to their full capacity. It would be so simple to fix their problems. Steps are already being taken with the feeding and education programs. There must be more of these programs. Proper attention must be given to the Filipino people. Then and only then will the Philippines become a country of only wealth and prosperity, growth and happiness.

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