

BRIDGING EXCELLENCE AND HUMANITARIANISM: THE ROLE OF ACADEME IN FIGHTING POVERTY

Vincent R. Altez

Much had been told in history that the best symphony comes from everyone in the group doing the best they can have for themselves as well as for the group. When a person pursues what is essential for his well-being and tries to make himself as successful as possible, it is a pleasing truth for his community. But it is more rewarding if that individual, along with his success, also makes a difference for the community. This simple analogy stands up as one of the major foundations for achieving accomplishments in many areas of human concerns including the continuous search for solutions to alleviate poverty.

Academe is a witness to the increasing rate of poverty in the Philippines especially in the urban areas. Along with the development of Metro Manila and other major regional centers, the manifestations of poverty are also creating its own magnitude. Hordes of domestic migrants from depressed provinces came in to developed locations to find their source of living and attempt to experience some of the luxuries in life. However, these urban areas do not have enough capacity to provide them the best quality of life which in turn creates additional problems like proliferation of informal settlers, unemployment, and, worst, hunger.

POVERTY FROM A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

The spectrum of proposals and studies to address poverty is now piling up and keeps on growing. The effort to define and redefine the parameters of poverty, just to understand how to solve it, has gone so extensive that it becomes a major global concern. Looking for example at the international arena, the United Nation emphasized in its Millennium Development Goal (MDG) that the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger shall be its topmost priority.

And in such position, the member-countries vowed with conviction that, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day and those who suffer from hunger will be both halved.

In the Philippines, there is also a continuous struggle against poverty. With the principle of convergence in the implementation of anti-poverty programs, the Arroyo administration, through Memorandum Circular No. 33, institutionalized the KALAHU (Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan) program in 2002 as the flagship program of the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) and a priority program of all government agencies. In academe, the Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) also recognized the need to extend their arms to the most depressed and deprived communities across the country. From basic community services to sharing of technology, the HEIs are making these initiatives part of their culture.

THE AMALGAM OF EXCELLENCE AND HUMANITARIANISM

Schools' participation in fighting poverty could be another avenue that would help the government and other concerned organizations that are deeply passionate in this endeavor. It is an observed principle nowadays that schools are making their brand of education to be as excellent as possible. And excellence could be defined in many ways. It could be on the uniqueness and relevance of course curriculum, qualification of faculty, presence of state-of-the-art facilities or just the intelligence of its studentry. Along with the search for excellence, schools also give priority to its social responsibility. They give scholarships, community service and some technical know-how to deserving communities. Today, there is an emerging perspective that combining excellence and humanitarianism in its true form could boost the effort of academe not only to be excellent in what they are offering more so in engaging themselves in solving one of the greatest problems in the history of the Philippines.

Excellence and humanitarianism should not be heading towards different directions in the academe. A simple case in point that whenever schools raise their tuition fees in order to uplift their academic facilities and knowledge-based resources, it should also find ways to ease the additional burden to students and parents who are only giving education a meager 4% of their total expenditures. Creativity in the payment scheme, mutual agreement with parents, and availability of loans and credit machinery could be enhanced in the process. These mechanisms would allow students to continue their education while the schools achieve the desired improvement in their infrastructure.

Combining excellence and humanitarianism could also be manifested in research and development. Science should also have inclination for poverty reduction as it builds new inventions, innovative creations and some technological frontiers. For one, the academe may pursue research on food technology that would make the country achieve sufficiency on its food requirements. Rising food prices seems to be a solid hurdle nowadays. It even caused social unrests in some parts of the world. If the academe could think of how the Philippines go beyond food security and attain food sustainability, the prize can even be more like a Nobel-prize achievement.

Furthermore, there is also a need for prospects in dealing with microfinance as it is one strategy that would give opportunity for the poor to participate in the local market. Many NGOs are pursuing microfinance in the countryside but some of them still need an academic perspective to come up with better business projections for the poor.

FINDING AN EQUILIBRIUM

The challenge in having this integration is on how schools can have a balanced disposition between excellence and humanitarianism. The dominance of one over the other may be a little bit difficult for the academe to accomplish its primary goal. Excellence needs a spice of humanitarianism. And in the same thought, willingness to help can be complete and inspiring if the academe has already proven its excellence on its field.

Poverty needs an intellectual approach more than the numbers and frequencies that are given in local and international surveys. The government has already launched various programs but most of them are just hit and miss and often confusing. As the country approaches the end of the MDG target, HEIs have to step up, intensify its efforts and implement actions. HEIs should shift its endeavors from an institution that simply strives to provide quality education to an organization that is capitalizing its own resources that bridges excellence and humanitarianism in alleviating poverty.