

POLICY BRIEF

TOWARDS INNOVATIVE, LIVEABLE, AND PROSPEROUS ASIAN MEGACITIES

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MORE THAN JUST A HOUSING PROBLEM: LEARNING FROM GAWAD KALINGA'S EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Gawad Kalinga (literally “to give care”) is a community development model that begins at the grassroots level. It is an innovative approach that could be the key to solving some of Philippine society’s biggest concerns – poverty and homelessness.

While it was not originally conceived to solve the urban housing problem, Gawad Kalinga (GK) is now known largely because of its success in mobilizing donors, volunteers, and the intended beneficiaries themselves in building beautiful and colorful houses in thousands of communities all over the country. As of June 2009, it has built a total of 33,439 houses in 1,400 villages in the Philippines. Almost 9,000 houses of these houses were built in Metro Manila alone (Gawad Kalinga, 2009).

More than building houses, though, GK has initiated self-sustaining programs that have improved the lives of more than 200,000 families throughout the country (and counting) since the mid-1990s. This has prompted observers to ask about the formula of its continued success.

This policy brief, which borrows heavily from the study of Habaradas and Aquino (2010), answers the following questions: What are the innovations implemented by

Gawad Kalinga to address the problem of urban housing in Metro Manila, and how effective are these innovations?

HOMELESSNESS IN THE CITY

To provide proper context, we present some pertinent facts regarding the urban housing problem in the National Capital Region (NCR).

As the country’s premier urban center, Metro Manila serves as a magnet to migrants from the provinces seeking opportunities in the city. Many of these people have not been able to afford adequate housing due to the higher cost of city living and to difficulties in securing sources of livelihood. Thus, they resort to informal settling.

According to SRTC (2010), the total number of informal settlers (in terms of households) in Metro Manila is 199,398, which constitutes 36.20% of the total number of informal settlers in the country.

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Assuming an average of five persons per household, this translates to approximately 996,990 informal settlers.

To address this problem, various government agencies have implemented programs and projects (e.g. housing infrastructure, relocations, and funding through long-term mortgages) that seek to address the housing needs of urban settlers. Resource constraints, however, have prevented the government from reaching its housing targets. In the Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) 2004-2010, the government made provisions for shelter assistance to 1,145,668 households for the period of 2005-2010. But this is only around 30% of the country's total housing need for the said period.

Clearly, government cannot address the problem of homelessness by itself. This requires the cooperation of various sectors of society. Fortunately, Gawad Kalinga provides a viable and replicable model that spells out the critical roles that must be played by the private sector, non-government organizations, academe, concerned citizens, and the community members themselves to solve a problem of this magnitude.

INNOVATIONS OF GAWAD KALINGA

Ratanawahara and Chairatana (2009) proposed several dimensions in examining city innovations, namely product, service, process, position, institution, and paradigm. In Gawad Kalinga, the following innovations are integral in its community development model:

- EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES (paradigmatic innovation) that implement a
- HOLISTIC AND INTEGRATED APPROACH (product, service and process innovations), made possible by
- BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND NURTURING MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS (institutional innovation), and enhanced by
- A STRONG AND CREDIBLE BRAND (positioning innovation).

Building Empowered Communities

In Gawad Kalinga, the most important innovation takes the form of a shift in paradigm of what community development ought to be. Instead of looking at members of the poor communities as passive actors (i.e. as mere recipients of donations or as beneficiaries of support programs), GK considers them as active participants in the development process.

This is the reason why GK actively engages the kapitbahayan, who must take responsibility for attaining the vision of GK in their respective communities. The members of the community organize themselves into a neighborhood association; they actively participate in the values formation program of GK; and they play a central role in the implementation of the various GK programs (e.g. cleanliness and beautification, peace and order, community socials and recreation, basic community health care and first aid, food self sufficiency, and social service) in the community. Through the help of the caretaker team and the support provided by donors and volunteers, residents become stewards of their own communities.

Building Relationships and Nurturing Meaningful Partnerships

The community development model of GK also emphasizes the building of relationships among the different actors involved in what it calls a “nation-building” movement. This is the institutional dimension of innovation.

Before programs are introduced to the target community, for instance, the caretaker team sets the stage for a continuing relationship with the community members by organizing informal consultation meetings with them, by conversing with them in places where they usually gather, and by familiarizing themselves with the culture of the community. They also participate in the community's social activities, e.g. birthdays, fiesta, and wakes.

Even corporate partners and individual donors are oriented about Gawad Kalinga by bringing them to a GK site. Through their interaction with the members of the kapitbahayan, these benefactors become more involved in the various programs of GK in their adopted communities, and a more enduring relationship is formed, as a result.

A Holistic and Integrated Approach

Gawad Kalinga adopts a holistic approach to community development, one that involves educational, health, livelihood and environmental programs, among others. GK programs include the following: (a) GK Child and Youth Development Program, which develops the skills and talents of the kids and youth of GK communities “by inculcating values and providing opportunities that

bring out their fullest potentials;” (b) GK Bayan-Anihan, its food self-sufficiency program; (c) GK Mabuhay, which transforms GK sites into tourist destinations and cultural attractions; and (d) Green Kalinga, which creates environment-friendly projects such as solid waste management, and promotes the use of environment-friendly materials into GK infrastructure as well as the use of renewable energy sources in communities.

Building the GK Brand

Contributing to GK’s rapid growth is the reputation it has built over the years. Gawad Kalinga has succeeded in creating an image that appeals to donors, volunteers, and other stakeholders. For example, GK is fashioned as a nation-building movement. It seeks to build a nation “empowered by people with faith and patriotism” and one that is made up of “caring and sharing communities, dedicated to eradicate poverty and restore human dignity” (GKBI, 2009).

Since it was founded in 1995, Gawad Kalinga has managed to put a unique spin to its programs and activities. Because of this, GK has always looked fresh and dynamic to interested observers. For example, GK was originally known for building “faith communities” because of its values formation programs, and because of its association with the Couples for Christ. When it made inroads in building homes in war-torn Mindanao, GK communities were dubbed as “peace zones” where Muslims and Christians work together to address poverty. Recently, GK communities have become “eco-friendly villages” as well because they have begun to integrate environmentally-sound practices

in their way of living. GK villages have also been transformed into “tourist spots” that showcase the inherent charm and uniqueness of each place.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Gawad Kalinga’s experience shows us that it is not just a “housing problem” that the country has to confront. The problem of homelessness must be viewed from a systemic perspective. The solution goes beyond allocating resources to secure land and to build enough houses that the poor can afford. It requires a holistic approach that includes values formation, health programs, livelihood, and environmental sustainability, among others. While the cooperation of various government agencies, private companies, local government units, and individual donors are critical in sustaining these programs, these efforts must be anchored on a stable and empowered community, whose members play a central role in addressing their present needs and in charting their collective future.

It must be acknowledged that Republic Act 7279 or the “Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992.” RA 7279 is an appropriate piece of legislation, It provides for the implementation of a “comprehensive and continuing” Urban Development and Housing Program, the aims of which are to “uplift the conditions of the underprivileged and homeless citizens in urban areas and in resettlement areas by making available to them decent housing at affordable cost, basic services, and employment opportunities” and to “adopt workable policies to regulate and direct urban growth and expansion towards a dispersed

urban net and more balanced urban-rural interdependence.”

The Program also seeks to “improve the capability of local government units in undertaking urban development and housing programs and projects,” and encourages “more effective people’s participation in the urban development process.” However, community empowerment and livelihood programs are clearly not central strategies as envisioned by the law, which expectedly focused on the following areas: (a) land use, inventory, acquisition, and disposition; (b) socialized housing procedures; (c) resettlement; (d) the community mortgage program; (e) program implementation, and (f) funding.

Even the revised National Urban Development and Housing Framework (NUDHF 2009-2016) underplays, if not totally ignores, the role of an empowered community. Instead, it places the burden of addressing the “housing problem” on the local government units (LGUs), government agencies such as the National Housing Authority (NHA), and the private sector.

The GK experience, however, tells us that an empowered community is the cornerstone of a successful housing initiative. Even the poorest communities that have adopted the GK way succeeded in building homes even if they did not have access to housing credit. This demolishes the unquestioned premise that economic growth and the resulting increase in income are requisites to solving the housing problem.

This is not to say that government should play a peripheral role. Resolving the legal issues concerning land ownership, land use, and security of tenure are critical. Implementing appropriate economic policies and strengthening governance are equally important in promoting overall urban development. Thus, government must focus on its role as a “facilitator” rather than as a “giver”.

Policy makers must also realize that the problem of informal settling and homelessness requires more than an economic and logistical solution. Building the physical infrastructure is important, but strengthening the social infrastructure is indispensable.

Given these insights, some policy options

that can be considered as refinements to the already comprehensive set of strategies identified in the NUDHF 2009-2016 are as follows:

1. Reckon beneficiaries of socialized housing programs not as individuals (as indicated in Article V Section 16 of R.A. 7279) but as groups of individuals belonging to an organized community or neighborhood association. Programs must be geared towards empowering the community rather than just providing financial support.
2. Adopt a holistic approach in implementing socialized housing programs. Values formation programs, education, health programs, and livelihood programs must go hand-

in-hand with the actual building of homes.

3. Encourage partnerships between national government agencies and Gawad Kalinga (or other similar groups) in implementing projects at the community level.
4. Strengthen the capability of LGUs not only in terms of strategic planning, but also in terms of organizing communities and establishing linkages with national government agencies, NGOs, and private businesses that could help in initiating and implementing programs in the community.

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