The Bridge over Troubled Water

"Wherever we lift one soul from a life of poverty, we are defending human rights. And whenever we fail in this mission, we are failing human rights." – Kofi Annan, 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations (1 January 1997 – 31 December 2006).

by Giovanni G. Montilla

To lift one soul from poverty means to uphold human rights, so to speak. But the depth of poverty in the country has been a rumbling struggle, a predicament that continuously troubles its basic institution, the Filipino Family.

The Philippines has limited financial resources and high poverty rate commonly attributed to rapid population growth, high unemployment or underemployment rate, low level of education, and literacy and human development factors. It seems ironic that most of our country leaders have avowed to eradicate extreme poverty yet it remains a hurdle and a social-economic dilemma.

Notably, several provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could be realized through the absence of poverty. One among these is embodied under Art. 25, par. 1 which states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

In support, the state recognizes that every person should not be a victim of poverty. Sec. 9, Art. II of the 1987 Constitution states that: "The State shall promote a just and dynamic social order that will ensure the prosperity and independence of the nation and free the people from poverty through policies that provide adequate social services, promote full employment, a rising standard of living, and an improved quality of life for all."

Towards this end, numerous programs of the government were launched in pursuit of freedom from poverty. For the past decade the country's poverty rate has declined. In fact, the World Bank revealed that from 2006 to 2015 the robust economic growth helped the poverty rate in the Philippines to fall by five percentage points. Poverty declined from 26.6 percent in 2006 to 21.6 percent in 2015. According to this report, one of the factors that created the decline was the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps).[1]

The program provides conditional cash grants to the poorest of the poor, to improve the health, nutrition, and the education of children aged 0-18. It is patterned after the conditional cash transfer (CCT) schemes in Latin American and African countries, which have lifted millions of people from poverty.[2]

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the lead agency of this program, patterned the conditional cash transfer system from developing countries, such as Brazil and Mexico. In 2007, the DSWD pre-pilot tested this program in the municipalities of Sibagat and Esperanza in Agusan del Sur, the municipalities of Lopez Jaena and Bonifacio in Misamis Occidental, the Caraga Region, and the cities of Pasay and Caloocan in a 50 million pesos budget. It was renamed Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) by Santiago and Samantha A. Vizconde on July 16, 2008 by Administrative Order No. 16, s. 2008 and set implementing guidelines. It is the flagship poverty alleviation program of the administration of former President Gloria Macapagal-Aroyo.[3]

> **"Arguments on the 4Ps suggest that with opposing views on this program, as of now the doubts are definitely hard to settle and may not be answered until another decade."**

A.O. No. 16, s. 2008, also known as "Guidelines on the Implementation of Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps)," tells that the legal basis of the implementation of this program is pursuant to the Millennium Development Goals addressing the following:

a. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;

b. Achieve universal primary education;

c. Reduce child mortality;

d. Improve maternal health; and

e. Promote gender equality and empower women.

Under these guidelines, the 4Ps is described as a poverty reduction strategy that provides cash grant to extreme poor households to allow the members of the families to meet certain human development goals. It is focused on building human capital of poorest families because low schooling and high malnutrition rate are strongly associated with poverty cycle in the Philippines.

The goal of 4Ps is to promote human capital among poor families, specially for children to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. It is also geared towards the following objectives:

1. To improve preventive health care of pregnant women and young children;
2. To increase enrollment/ attendance of children at elementary level;
3. *To reduce incidence of child labor;*
4. To raise consumption of poor households on nutrient dense foods;
5. To encourage parents to invest in their children's (and their own) future; and
6. To encourage parent's participation in the growth and development of young children, as well as involvement in the community.[4]

Among the advantages of this program is that it lessens the incidence of child labor and other forms of child abuse through their cash subsidy component and reduced school costs, thereby. Compliance to this requirement of the 4Ps is ensured, and the literacy rate of the children is also expected to increase. The 4Ps likewise intends to provide the basis for this much needed equality by providing the poor people with the education that they could not access otherwise. It is also prospected to address health issues by solving problems on malnutrition and even promote gender empowerment seeing as the responsibility of managing the cash grants are given to the mother.

However, just like any other government program, the 4Ps also has its disadvantages that may encumber its helpful benefits. Poverty in the country is not only caused by the lack of economic resources, but also because of socio-economic and political factors that prevent the equality and distribution of resources. Although 4Ps aims to provide the poor with the education, which is otherwise inaccessible, it does not directly answer the socio-economic and political problems that are the primary cause of poverty. In the case of the 4Ps in the Philippines, it does not answer the issues regarding the political and economic elite families. And poverty can only be totally alleviated if there are programs that could target its roots. It does not benefit middle-income groups, which are also suffering from issues of poverty and limited access to educational and health benefits as 4Ps is programmed to help only the extremely poor. Since the program constitutes cash grants, its implementation requires a huge amount of finance which the large amounts of financial resources needed to implement the program does not generate guaranteed returns to the economy as much as infrastructure projects like construction of roads, bridges, and railways do.[5]

Nonetheless, a major threat that has begun to manifest is the fund misuse by some program beneficiaries. A UNTV news report revealed that there are some beneficiaries of the government's cash grants under 4Ps who are using the fund for vices and gambling. Under the program, one poor family may receive cash assistance from the government amounting to 6,000 to 15,000 pesos for health and education grants aside from the rice supply for beneficiaries. Despite reports on misuse of the social assistance fund, the government maintains that there is no need to lessen the number of the program's beneficiaries. "We have maintained the recipients, 4.4 million, the President ordered rice subsidy for the 4P's beneficiaries, it is in the budget, at the same time, on our part, we do not stop there. Convergence is our strategy, what programs are needed to make them independent," said DSWD Secretary Taguiwalo.

In the approved budget of the DSWD for 2017, P78.2 billion is the intended fund for the 4P's. Meanwhile, the secretary admits that program is not a solution to poverty, but sustainable economic growth for the country is. "The financial assistance will help them, but this is not the solution for poverty. The government must have long term programs not only cash assistance but more jobs, farmlands and businesses", she added.[6]

It cannot be denied that the presence of abuse and misuse of rights and privileges in the country has become prevalent. The advent of technology has taken the criminality to the next level, but the way of life is left behind. Many would be seemingly disappointed but not surprised that the dirt of politics has flooded almost every aspect of society. And in the midst of all of these, Filipinos continue to dream of sustainability and freedom of poverty. Can the program withstand the storm of these problems? Or will it be another structure for a noble cause to be overruled by the sad truth of abuse and corruption?

Arguments on the 4Ps suggest that with opposing views on this program, the doubts are definitely hard to settle and may not be answered until another decade. Its effect on the economy towards the state of poverty still clouds the future of the country. Mainly, the question dwells on whether it is a bridge that connects people who continuously writhes within the bounds of poverty to a standard of living or just a bridge over troubled water?

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[1] The World Bank. (2018, May 30). Philippines' Poverty Rate Declines; More Well-Paying Jobs and Opportunities Needed. Press Release.

[2] Conditional Cash Transfers. The Official Gazette.

[3] Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program. Wikipedia.

[4] Department of Social Welfare and Development. (2008). Guidelines on the Implementation of Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). Administrative Order No. 16, s. 2008.

[5] Mella, M., Osido, F.C., & Suing, L. (n.d.). Conditional Cash Transfer Program in the Philippines: Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino. Blog.

[6] UNTV. DSWD denies misuse; will maintain number of beneficiaries

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