

No More Band Aid Immigration Reform Proposals

Diaspora Donations Could Grow to Alleviate Poverty and Reduce Migration

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In 2007, on a yearlong fellowship from the Chicago Community Trust, I traveled to my mother's native village in Bicol, Philippines, where I was confronted by the poverty of my own distant relatives. Many of them literally wanted to travel inside my luggage and join me back in Chicago. I visited my cousin, Romy. He lives in a one-room shack with a couple of tin sheets as roofing and discarded cardboard boxes as walls. I didn't see a bed; he probably sleeps on the floor with his wife and two children. He offered me a chair to sit on, the only visible furniture in the house. In his early 40s, he patches tricycle tires for a living. Tricycles are motorcycles with sidecars attached and are used for public transportation in small towns. Many tricycle drivers opt to patch the tires and not buy new ones to save money. My cousin and I stood in the heat of the sun all day in front of the public market waiting for tricycles that needed their tires patched up. Romy earned about 80 pesos, less than \$2, for the entire day. His earnings were not enough to buy rice, fish and vegetables to feed his family.

During my visit, I saw the connection between my relatives' poverty and the over-

whelming number of immigrants who feel they must migrate to seek a better life. At that time, I was working as the Executive Director of the Coalition of African, Arab, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois (CAAALII), one the largest immigrant-led coalitions in the country. I was advocating for tens of thousands of immigrants and refugees but their numbers kept increasing exponentially every year. I felt that I was bailing water out of a flooded basement and I was too exhausted to even look around to plug the "hole."

My visit to my mother's village was a turning point in my life. I realized that the "hole" was the abject poverty of my own relatives and millions of workers in many migrant-sending countries that are so desperate they are forced to seek a better life elsewhere. I decided to address the root cause of migration by leveraging the financial and technical potential of the growing Filipino diaspora to improve the economic situation in the Philippines. I realized that many Filipinos like myself are living abroad and that collectively we could make a difference by giving sustainably and responsibly back home.

In 2008, I decided to encourage other Filipinos to donate, volunteer and improve

the situation in the Philippines; to plug the "hole." I sent my cousin's son Vicente to nursing school, the first one in his family to go to college. Back in Chicago, I asked my family and friends for donations; I collected \$5,000 and built five homes for the poor. I found out that I was not alone. Immigrants send tens of billions of remittances back home. In 2010, the Philippines received almost \$19 billion in remittances, saving the country from deep economic recession. However, many of these remittances were used for personal consumption and family needs. Some of the remittances being sent were used to fund philanthropic projects. Unfortunately, many of these donations are sporadic, isolated, and disconnected. The best practices are not being shared. Simple coordination and resource sharing are not happening on the ground, even with the best intentions.

So I decided to establish the Bayanihan Foundation Worldwide, based on Filipino traditional values of bayanihan, meaning community spirit, trust, and helping each other. I hope that my donations and those of others in the diaspora will improve the living situations back home for the long term and somehow plug the "hole" of desperate poverty which pushes people to migrate to US cities

like Chicago. Are diaspora donations effective in alleviating poverty? That remains to be seen. I am hopeful that these community projects could grow over time and address the poverty.

Comprehensive immigration reform must go beyond the band-aid approach for any reform to work. It should include poverty reduction programs in migrant-sending countries as a necessary component. Unfortunately, none of the proposals, either from the left or the right, include any poverty alleviation projects in any migrant-sending country, particularly Mexico, which accounts for almost 50% of the undocumented population in the US. On the other hand, immigrants are starting to contribute to community development projects back in their native countries that in time could grow to alleviate poverty. The phenomenon of diaspora giving is nothing new. Jewish, Irish and Italian Americans and many others have been giving and sharing their talent and resources with their homelands for decades. For newer immigrant communities like the Filipinos, the major challenge is to move from giving that is fragmented and sporadic to something sustainable, coordinated and responsible. ♦