



BUILDER OF DREAM^{*}

Antonio Meloto, Founder of Gawad Kalinga (GK), Philippines.

Introduction

In a developing country like the Philippines it is undeniable that negative political and social issues are prevalent, as well as the intricate challenges faced by Filipinos all left undone; and indeed, “transforming leaders” are needed for they bear the good heart enriched with volunteerism and love for others. These are those people who are propelled into meaningful actions and purposes. Despite the fact that a united prayer can make this all settled, Gawad Kalinga founder Antonio “Tony” Meloto proved doing more than this can make everything better.

As Tony Meloto’s living revolves over his life as an entrepreneur and a Couples for Christ servant, being a loving father of five and a caring Lolo of three grandchildren, he felt the need to do something that could make the slum-dwellers’ life better. He desired to mold his ideals and goals into something that would benefit larger groups of Filipino people. And one of his ways in order to achieve this is to write the book “Builder of Dreams” which he dedicated to Ninoy and Cory because their nationalism has inspired him since 1986; when democracy was restored in the country.

The “Builder of Dreams” is “about faith of common believers who choose to act rather than to preach, about citizens wanting to correct what has been corrupted rather than blame, about people who chose hope over cynicism by planting their dreams on the ground and learning to do it with others.” Through this book, Tony Meloto had reflected what patriotism and good deeds are truly all about. The book embodied the hope of Filipinos who dreamt better times after living as second class citizens within 400 years. It definitely emerged the Filipino spirit and unleashed its greatness. The book also recognized the growing armies of Filipinos who vowed to bring the dream together.

His primary goal is to revive what was lost and to bring the best out of it. He narrated how his efforts created the very first Gawad Kalinga village. It transformed the ever known Bagong Silang in Caloocan City into a neighborhood that endowed new, safe, and attractive homes for the needy; unlike how it looked like before— where gangsters, young and old, and crimes sickened the place. He shared how his actions paved way for the rehabilitation of the youth who had led wayward lives. His movement blossomed; adults learned acceptable ways of earning money and the kids who were once crime-makers decided to go to school. “There was no blueprint, no

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road map and no budget when we ventured into unknown territory, just a lot of faith, a strong intuition and the conscience to do what was good and right; the impulse to act and the instinct to survive.”

The book sparked hope and consciousness as this country is a gift from God. It identified proper recognition of who the real character is and who will support him on the play of his objective. “The government is not our enemy; neither is business or rich landowners or, the criminals in the urban slums, and the rebels in the countryside. Poverty is our enemy, along with all the evils that cause it—the peaceful way to vanish this is to discover winning formula where rich and poor benefit from caring and sharing.”

Tony Meloto has never been a fictional-story-writer or even a superb novel author; but his writing style is real good. It caught souls that will soon embolden nobility. Each word reflected how reality looks like. It helped readers to understand what Philippines has to be and how Filipinos should be. Sharing real life stories in the book also helped Meloto in his pursuance of his aspirations and beliefs.

In this book, Tony also revealed his heart-melting sacrifices just for the accomplishment of his vision. Sacrifices not only in his own self, but as well to his family, friends and the usual society he’s living with; the parameter where true-blooded Filipinos dwell. And these encumbrances caused him to attain what he was aiming for.

“In writing this book, I remember with fondness the friends I have lost along the way. I carry the burden of losing people I treasured, in exchange for the friendship to the poor. The fault is mine, but the gain is mine as well. In time we will be wiser and we will gain our friendship so nothing is lost at all.”

Gawad Kalinga as conceived and evolved by Tony Meloto and its growing partners is a peaceful movement for radical citizenship and heroic leadership for social transformation anchored on love for our Creator, one another, the nation and humanity. It applies the organizing principle of “Subsidiarity” by people translating their own vision of the good life and the good society into action by themselves with the help of kindred souls everywhere. GK’s transforming leaders and followers “raise each other to higher levels of motivation and morality.” They dare to transform the Philippines; even offer a model for ending poverty in the world.

In my already long life I have devoted nearly 60 years to teaching, research, university administration, reform advocacy, and occasional public service. My concerns as a student of politics and public administration include nation-building, democratization, and citizenship and leadership for good governance.

Now I am an inspired student and follower of Tony Meloto as a “transformative” or “transforming leader” in the conception of James MacGregor Burns. I have read Tony’s speeches, listened to him speak in public, and talked with him. I know of his



immense impact on people and leaders here and abroad. I also share Tony's ideas and experience with my students.

According to MacGregor Burns (Leadership, 1979), a transforming leader purposely achieves substantial and "real change in the direction of 'higher' values" (p. 434) such as freedom, peace, justice, nationalism, morality "that meet people's enduring needs (p. 461)." The transforming leader is thus morally elevating vis-à-vis other leaders and other followers whom he influences with his purpose, vision and example. He "taps the needs and raises the expectations and helps shape the values—and hence mobilizes the potential—of followers (p. 455)." "The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents (p. 4)." "But transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both (p. 20)." "Leaders and followers raise each other to higher levels of motivation and morality (p. 20)." "That people can be lifted to their better self is the secret of transforming leadership...(p. 462)."

As a transforming leader of GawadKalinga, the growing social movement involving housing for the poor, community development and nation-building in the Philippines, Tony Meloto's vision, mission and personal example are spreading beyond our shores. He compels attention and active response from people in various walks of life. For he addresses in distinctive ways some of our basic problems as a weak nation with a "soft state." These include massive poverty, landlessness, homelessness and endemic corruption, and lack of self-confidence and nationalism. In this demoralizing situation, many people of goodwill who want to do something are dismayed if not also immobilized. Where to begin and make a personal difference? In Gawad Kalinga Tony Meloto and his fellow leaders and members show how it can be done.

The "Superiority Principle" of Colonial and Centralized Governance

Under Spain for over 350 years and then the United States for almost half a century (and three years under the Japanese) the colonial power wanted to control our people under a highly centralized unitary system. Since our independence in 1946 our own leaders have governed the country in essentially the same centralized and domineering unitary system with a powerful president, the legislature, the higher courts and the bureaucracy based in the national capital. The great majority of the people who live in local communities and our myriad local governments are heavily dependent upon and dominated by national government institutions and national leaders and officials.

Our political, economic and social development is organized under the "Superiority Principle." This is marked by the dominance of the few wealthy and powerful families over the many people who are poor and powerless, by the dominance of the center of



power over the weak and dependent periphery, by the primacy of the higher levels over the lower ones. This may also be called the “top down” or “trickle down” approach to governance and national development.

A new “Subsidiarity Movement” of Filipino reformers and organizers calls this the “Pinatulo.” This is the opposite of “Pinatubo” (growing, nurturing, or building from below), or organizing and developing along the “Subsidiarity Principle” initiated by Pope Pius XI in 1931 and adopted since then in various ways in different countries. Among the Filipino leaders of Pinatubo are Philip Camara and Sixto K. Roxas. The global scope and relevance of the “Superiority Principle” and the “Subsidiary Principle” are suggested in the Annex to this paper entitled “A Call for Vision Not Ambition: KILUSANG PINATUBO.”

With some notable exceptions many of our political and corporate leaders are too self-serving in governing our oligarchic democracy and business corporations. They tend to exploit our weaknesses as a nation instead of building on our potential strengths. Under our political class we still have a relatively thin middle class of educated, critical and independent members, and a large base of poor, insecure and vulnerable people.

Our fitful national struggle to modernize, democratize and develop has been hindered by lack of a critical mass of selfless, credible and inspiring leaders who can inspire, empower and unite the great majority of our citizens. But there is growing consciousness of what ought to be done and can be done to transform our traditional structures, institutions and modes of behavior—in search of free and fair elections, a new kind of politics, good citizenship, good leadership and good governance: the constitutional ideals of a “just and humane society, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.” Gawad Kalinga is one bright star in the firmament of social innovations and organizations offering new ways, and new hope and confidence.

Unsustainable “Community Development” in the 1950s

Not long after the end of World War II and the ensuing rehabilitation and reconstruction of the country various innovations in rural development were introduced. These included the community schools, the community centers of NAMFREL (the National Movement for Free Elections), and the rural development projects of PRRM (Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement). With technical support from the United Nations and some U.S. Government assistance, the National Government through the Philippine Community Development Council launched a national community development program in 1955. This was during the term of the very popular and charismatic President Ramon Magsaysay. “The Man of the Masses” was known to champion the common man’s welfare and the development of the barrios where most citizens live.

Obstructive bureaucratic conflicts and inertia led Magsaysay to establish his Presidential Assistant on Community Development in place of the interdepartmental Council. Under Ramon P. Binamira as Presidential Assistant a cadre of community



development workers were trained and deployed in barrios across the country. The CD workers organized citizens to initiate local development projects such as farm-to-market feeder roads, irrigation, and school houses. At the same time Magsaysay continued his program for re-settlement communities in Mindanao for former rebels in Luzon, the Huks.

As community self-help efforts aided by the government, the local people contributed their labor and local materials (like sand and gravel, wood and bamboo), while the government supplied the needed technicians, cement and equipment. This was unlike traditional government services and relief based mainly on direct government services, subsidies and political patronage. The innovation was called “aided community self-help.” Local leaders and residents were encouraged to meet the challenge. (My doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan in 1959 was about the formulation of the community development program under Magsaysay and was published as *Focus on the Barrio*.)

Before long, however, the political tradition and culture of political (governmental) patronage and citizen dependency on government and dole outs, and the weight and inertia of bureaucracy grounded the innovation of aided community self-help. In general most presidents after Magsaysay forgot about the idea of aided community self-help as an organizing principle consistent with the “Subsidiarity Principle.” The “Superiority Principle” of a highly centralized government and political patron-clientele relations has largely prevailed.

The Gawad Kalinga “Subsidiarity Approach:” Focus on People, Community Self-Help and Nation-Building

Unlike the “government aided community self-help” efforts in the 1950s and early 1960s, Tony Meloto led the Gawad Kalinga under the sponsorship of the Catholic Couple’s for Christ. As a leader of a nationwide lay religious and nongovernmental movement of Catholic activists, Tony is committed to make GK live out Jesus Christ’s fundamental command to the faithful: “Love God with all your heart and soul, with all your mind and strength, and love thy neighbor as thyself;” and especially to help and serve the poor among us.

Tony and his fellow GK volunteers have chosen to focus on organizing poor, landless and homeless people and helping them acquire the land on which to build their own homes. Beyond these basic human needs, GK volunteers then help the new communities to organize and sustain themselves socially and economically as well as politically.

As a consequence, the individual members and leaders of GK settlements have developed a new identity and sense of community and pride as challenged and self-sustaining groups of people, ever learning to do what they can do for themselves and for the common good in their community. In a sense, their communal lives, efforts



and aspirations can be seen as integral parts, a microcosm, of a new mode of Filipino nation-building.

In turn the visible physical success and the palpable sense of individual and group fulfillment shown in the thousands of GK settlements and their members persuade more and more donors of land, money, materials, and voluntary labor around the Philippines and abroad to join the GK movement. Numerically, the original GK goal was to build 700,000 homes in 7,000 communities by 2010. Now it is to help some 50 million Filipinos move out of poverty by 2024. The GK model is being applied in parts of Indonesia, Cambodia, East Timor, and Papua New Guinea. Volunteers and material support for GK have come from Filipinos and other benefactors in the U.S., Canada, Australia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Tony Meloto's Values and Vision

In its website Gawad Kalinga defines itself “to give care.” GK “is an alternative solution to the blatant poverty not just in the Philippines but in the world. GK’s vision for the Philippines is a slum-free, squatter-free nation through a simple strategy of providing land for the landless, homes for the homeless, food for the hungry, and as a result providing dignity and peace for every Filipino.” GK also has a global outlook: “In a world where there are enough resources for all but not enough sharing for all, our motto is ‘less for self, more for others, enough for all.’”

GK’s vision and mission reflect its origin as a project of the Catholic Couples for Christ, and these are informed and inspired in practice by Tony Meloto’s understanding of Christianity and democracy as applied to the conditions of his home country. To him the spirit of Gawad Kalinga “is bridging the disconnect between faith and action, between preaching and practice.” (“GawadKalinga: the Spirituality of Nation-Building.” Lecture at Ateneo de Manila, 5 October 2007.)

As a Filipino Catholic, Meloto diagnoses the basic weakness of the Philippines thus: “A strong nation needs a strong moral foundation. If we are a weak nation it must be because we are a weak people with nominal faith, lacking in character and moral conviction. A weak nation elects corrupt leaders who use immoral power for personal gain, who impose their will on the weak majority with the use of force and violence. Corruption, greed and violence that cause poverty are social ills that define us as a nation. In religion they are called sins. We cannot regain our pride as Filipinos unless we remove these ills.” (Op. cit.)

GK volunteers and local homeless people in a given location engage in “bayanihan.” They work together and learn values and skills as stewards in building homes for their own community. As they do, they become a “bayani” or hero to each other. As they build their own homes, the local people become empowered as individuals and as a self-sustaining community. They undertake educational, health, livelihood, and recreational activities and govern themselves. The ultimate end of widening “bayanihan” is to promote patriotism, societal renewal and nation-building for a just and caring society.



The ideal kind of leader is the “servant leader” who leads and sacrifices not to gain power for selfish ends. In Tony Meloto’s mind, with Jesus Christ as model exemplar, this is “padugo or bleeding for the cause—the passion to serve others out of love.” In his view: “development of conscience and character are cornerstones of good citizenship. Nation-building is about character building.” He compares citizenship to discipleship and to him “the essence of real manhood is honor. In a country of cheaters, honesty is of the highest value. In the land of the corrupt, a man of integrity is king. ...truth is the way to real power and freedom.”

The Essence of the Gawad Kalinga model and Tony Meloto’s Leadership

At the heart of Tony’s transforming leadership and example and the inspired efforts of his legions of co-leaders, followers and supporters, is his conscious and determined fusion of his religious faith as a Catholic and his secular idealism as a citizen. He combines God’s teaching to love and help the poor among us with the secular vision of building a just and humane society in which all enjoy their human rights through good citizenship, good leadership and good governance. To him being a true believer is one with being a good citizen and a good leader in an aspiring democracy and a developing country in a troubled world. He demonstrates that through community self-help, cooperation and solidarity, this unity and integrity of faith, civic culture and practical reason can lead to the transformation of people, communities, and leaders from different spheres of life.

Tony’s widening appeal and recognition are traceable to his winning personality, his simplicity and humility, his passion for his vocation, his physical stature and good looks, and his ability to communicate to mixed audiences, and move them to believe and follow and support Gawad Kalinga as the people’s movement. All these are enhanced by his credible disavowal of political ambition. As such he is able to challenge people to know themselves and to effect change for the common good in pursuit of: the practical aims of decent homes, employment, and supportive communities; the lofty ideals of love of God, of one’s brethren, and especially the poor and lowly; and a unifying national identity and pride as Filipinos in a growing Global Filipino Nation of close to 90 million in the homeland and 9 million overseas, and counting.

In His Own Words: Tony Meloto as GK Leader

It is best to hear more and directly from Tony Meloto as GK leader through these excerpts from his book, *Builder of Dreams*.

Radical citizenship and heroic leadership. The challenge in Gawad Kalinga to radical citizenship is an invitation for us to be living heroes. The spirit is the same: To love our country and to care for our people. To make everyone an everyday hero. Our country needs lifetime heroes, millions of them, not the once-in-a-lifetime great leader who will lead us to glory. Radical citizenship will raise heroic leadership among decision-makers who will go beyond self-interest and traditional politics for God and



country. "We use the term radical in GK as the highest passion to do good to others; love is its root. Radical citizenship is about being my brother's keeper. (p.144)

Patriotism. ...is not about narrow nationalism but about pride of country and the drive to gain respect as outstanding citizens of the global community. The best way to gain respect is to bring our country out of Third World poverty through the collective effort and sacrifice of our citizens, not by begging for aid from foreign funding institutions or depending on doles.... Patriotism...is about heart and spirit.... (p. 145)

Our nation and democracy, and love of country. Undemocratic and hardly patriotic in practice. The Philippines got left behind....We lacked a collective identity and dream. We hardly knew ourselves after being mongrelized by 350 years of colonization and the long period of enslavement that made us believe we were never good enough as a nation. Because of poverty, the majority of Filipinos had no say in their destiny; as a people, we had no collective pride of race and place or loyalty to a transcendent patriotic cause to help us discover our collective strength. ...Somebody once said that the difference between a rich nation and a poor one is their citizens' love for their country. (p. 146)

Citizenship and governance. Weak governance was the consequence of weak citizenship. (p. 147)

Visionary leaders needed to tap the people's power. Politics, as I saw it in our country, was not about heroic sacrifice but about wielding power, not about citizenship but about authority, not about ordinary citizens like me but about our rulers. There was untapped power in the silent and passive majority that was just waiting to be harnessed by visionary leaders. The missing ingredient in our development was power from the people. How could I get the leaders of government and of business to listen to voices from the ground? ... How could I make a difference as an ordinary citizen with neither political power nor business capital? (p. 148) For me, real power lies in not wanting it. Power is in my faith in my God, in my hope for my country, in my love for my people, in the nobility of my cause. The more people I cared for, the more leaders of State and market I engaged in honest and noble endeavors, the more support I would get for the cause. I would gain moral ascendancy by not putting a price tag to my soul. (p.148)

How could I make a difference? I figured that, to make a difference, I had to be different. My personal credibility was crucial to the lives of the many I wanted to help. My love for my country had to be beyond politics or profit.

- First, I must not desire power or profit for myself. I must not seek any public office or engage in business for personal advantage. (p. 148)
- Second, I must discover power in the powerless. Democracy is about people power. Nation-building is about being a builder of people.
- Third, I must have a big dream for the smallest citizen. No one will pay attention to us unless we had a big idea embraced by many. Government and business will listen if we have the numbers. It was a



numbers game for them - number of voters and consumers. The poor and the youth will give us the numbers.

- Fourth, I must build that dream on the ground for everyone to see and believe. Build, show and tell. Convince people that change is possible.
- Finally, I must learn to work with other people's initiatives to achieve connectivity, solidarity and scale. No one can do this alone. Other NGOs [and institutions] had the expertise we did not have. There was no point in reinventing the wheel when others could do it better. (p. 148)

Nation-building for the common good. To build a nation, we needed massive partnerships - people, private and public sectors working together. ... we must all pull in the same direction. ... We must also come to grips with the reality that the vision is bigger than ourselves, for in building a nation, we need every citizen to own the dream, to recognize the contributions of every Filipino, past, present and future. Given the enormity of the challenge, the good that was started by our predecessors must be continued and nurtured so that when the baton is passed on to future generations we shall collectively have crossed the finish line together. Nation-building is a massive effort to achieve the common good and a huge challenge to avoid our historical habit of leaving the weak behind. (p. 149)

Top-down global leadership and development. The sad reality of our times is that those who decide for the world are not connected to the people who suffer from their decisions. Even those who come from the poor forget about them, as I did. I had to make myself a channel for reconnection. Our dream is to heal our world—home after home, community after community, country after country. In healing others, we heal ourselves. (p. 150)

The GK Spirit affirmed. In 2006 the country affirmed the spirit of GK. Award after award was bestowed upon its nobility: the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, the first Haydee Yorac Award, the first Jose P. Laurel Award, the Manuel Luis Quezon Award, the Philippine Daily Inquirer's Filipino of the Year citation, the Philippine Star's People of the Year, Philippine Tatler Award, Rotary's Paul Harris Award, TOFIL Award, American Field Service Award, and many more. Most of the awards were given to me, although they were meant for many, mainly because I am the storyteller of the miracles that have actually happened in our country when people decided to put their faith into action, when they built their dreams on the ground and inspired many others to believe that the dreams of our people do happen. (p. 162)

GK as counterculture. They happened when people decided to die to themselves for others to live, when they subordinated their wants to take on the needs of others, when they surrendered their personal will to the greater will, when they started to pray more for the welfare of others than for themselves. It was in giving and honoring others that we grew as a movement. We became a counterculture to the historical pattern of



wanting control and credit that suppressed our growth as a nation. GK grew because Couples for Christ shared the dream with other religious communities, Christians shared it with Muslims, and Filipinos planted the seeds in other countries. It was this habit of control that we wanted to break for the work to bloom wherever it was planted. (p. 163) We will continue to tell our story and inspire many others to do the same, until we achieve our dream of liberating our country from poverty and corruption by 2024, twenty-one years from October 4, 2003, the day we launched GK as a global movement. (p. 171)

GK is transformative leadership, the politics of caring, and inclusive partnerships. GK is transformative leadership. It is the politics of caring. GK will partner with every political leader in the country—national and local, administration and opposition, past and present who will work with us, who share our vision and values. This is not to say that all officials are honest. That is not for me to judge. What is important is that they are above-board when dealing with us. We were warned often to avoid politicians "who might corrupt us." Amazingly, I am not aware of any GK worker who has been corrupted by them, but I know many politicians who have been transformed by entering our playing field of transparent partnership that extols honest delivery of services to the poor. We are now in partnership with almost five hundred mayors and governors, and I cannot enumerate the lives that have been blessed because we chose to engage them rather than judge them. (p. 241)

What makes GK a powerful model for development? Granted, its innovations in private sector partnerships and sweat equity models are part of its recipe for transformation. But the real secret is its focus on people. GK gives Filipinos (and friends of Filipinos) a way to do something about poverty—not by sterile donating money but through person-to-person connections with the poor communities that deserve our help in securing their own chance at prosperity. I hope that development programs in other countries will emulate GK's model and temper their sophisticated technical approaches with the most important element of all: the provision of direct opportunities for human beings to serve and uplift one another. (pp. 307-308)

The judgment of history. History will judge us not on how we start our life but how we end it, not how much wealth we have accumulated but how much we give to those in need, not how much power we wielded but how we used it to give justice to the powerless. If it did not happen then, it is never too late to do good – now. (p. 243)



To Conclude

Gawad Kalinga as conceived and evolved by Tony Meloto and its growing partners is a peaceful movement for radical citizenship and heroic leadership for social transformation anchored on love for our Creator, one another, the nation and humanity. It applies the organizing principle of “Subsidiarity” by people translating their own vision of the good life and the good society into action by themselves with the help of kindred souls everywhere. GK’s transforming leaders and followers “raise each other to higher levels of motivation and morality.” They dare to transform the Philippines; even offer a model of ending poverty in the world.