



COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

***On the Occasion of the 2009 Search for Innovative Philippine Human Rights Initiatives:
First Proposal Competition***

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**The Great Flood of Innovations:
A Tidal Wave of Change in the Human Rights Landscape**

A Keynote Speech delivered by
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“I believe in human dignity as the source of national purpose, human liberty as the source of national action, the human heart as the source of national compassion, and in the human mind as the source of our invention and our ideas.”

John F. Kennedy

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. We must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.”

William Shakespeare

Magandang hapon sa inyong lahat!

Throughout human history, the impetus for progress and change had stemmed from necessity, want, and doubt. And change had been carried out by those who had been willing to challenge norm, convention, and the comfort of predictable predicaments. Anyone who has been brave enough to take center stage in delivering progress must inevitably take up the cudgels for change.

Change, however, is a very difficult enterprise to undertake. It requires the will to overcome precedent and present circumstances, to determine that necessity is not fictitious, that dissatisfaction

is not whimsical – but is real, present and compelling. It requires overcoming all those that are satisfied, content and resistant to change.

Change must also overcome change itself. There are many standards of how much change is acceptable, many prevailing and underlying measures of determining a cost-benefit index for any given action, many ingrained formulas which determine when to take action, what action, how much of it and for how long. Change oftentimes requires us to re-examine our pre-set formulas and ultimately discard the current methods of change itself.

Of all the afflictions of our country today which require some measure of change, the field of human rights is caught in a flux of inevitable change, limited only by our creativity, and buried under a deluge of bland and prefabricated solutions. For example, the rise of extrajudicial killings and other crimes of impunity in this decade had caught us by surprise only because we were not paying enough attention to its persistence amidst our burgeoning democracy. The inescapable necessity to address these human rights violations had grown to urgent proportions before we had devised some of the most innovative solutions for protection.

The promulgation of the rules on the writs of amparo and habeas data were groundbreaking – a symbolic crossing of an invisible threshold that had hung over our heads since the Marcos years. In itself, it was a historic change, albeit more than two decades after the first opportunity to devise the same since the 1986 Revolution. But not more than a few years after the promulgation of the rules, and post a litany of executive issuances and legislative proclamations, we find ourselves struggling to find the promise of change that the new writs had sought to secure.

Crimes of impunity are only at the tip of the spear. Many other issues remain without any recent improvement. Informal settlements and housing, internal displacement and the peace process, poverty alleviation and education, just to name a few, are dealt with the same solutions, many of which are without much result. The predictable assessment is that the problems are, unfortunately, still the same.

While there are some sectors that are willing to wrangle with waiting for long-term results and flagging political will to sustain current interventions, there is a need to farm out new ideas. The purpose is not solely meant to find alternative solutions should the initial interventions finally fail. We may very well need new solutions that can work concurrently with existing solutions.

Beyond every intervention on the drawing board, in the implementing stage or in limbo, the bottom line is that we must produce positive results. This is the demand of this current state of change in the human rights landscape. We have identified a whole spectrum of issues that require our attention. We have mobilized massive undertakings to address these issues. Now, more than ever, we must produce results.

The goal of the KaSaMa Project is not merely a search for new solutions, but ultimately and at its very core, a search for meaningful outcomes and results in human rights endeavors. It is a quest for realizable, quantifiable, and tangible change that our people need.

It is very interesting to note that our partners from the Dutch Embassy were the ones who had made the ground-breaking proposition of holding this development marketplace for human rights, envisioned in the mold of that first coined and created by the World Bank.

As we know, some of the most ingenious and creative problem-solvers come from the Netherlands, whose feats of engineering and flood-control alone, without even mentioning other

fields, such as environmental planning and social legislation, to name a few, have placed them at the forefront of all kinds of innovation.

In the wake of the catastrophic flooding that has gripped the Philippines in the past weeks, we are painfully reminded of how dullness of enthusiasm, myopic foresight and blurriness of vision all lend to a dangerous concoction of societal and governmental inertia. Insightful studies had been conducted decades before, funding had been procured, inventive mechanized solutions had been installed as recently as within this decade, all in the name of managing land use in the flood-prone valley of the Pasig River and its tributaries.

However, no one appears to own these solutions, these ideas. They are all *res nullius*. They do not belong to the people in general, the people of the Marikina Valley and the Pasig River, nor to the national or local governments, for the simple reason that no one remembers any of these ideas. The result of the absence of ownership of these ideas is also very predictable – we've reduced the calamity *post-mortem* to a distasteful exercise of assigning blame.

What, then, do flooding, the Dutch engineering innovations and the recent historic rainfall in Luzon have to do with human rights?

It all begins with the question: Whose problem is it anyway?

For centuries, flooding has been the cross of the Dutch and their progenitors. Some of you might be familiar with the Delta Works Project, or the vast network of engineering solutions for flooding, consisting of storm-surge barriers, dams and dikes. You might even see it on cable television how Rotterdam has its own storm-surge gate to protect its ports.

But you might not know, and I didn't know this, as well, prior to this speech, that as far back as over 2500 years ago, the early inhabitants of the flood-prone plains of what is now known as the Netherlands had made artificial hills, intended to be temporary, elevated shelters until flood receded. We also know of the world-famous windmills of the Dutch, from the 13th century, and their indispensable function to diverting water out of low-lying lands.

After over two millenia, can anyone doubt the admission of the Dutch that flooding is their problem? Now, can we say the same about us and the flooding in the Marikina Valley? And now more pertinently to human rights, has the Filipino people truly recognized and admitted that we do have serious human rights problems across a vast spectrum of human rights issues?

I hope that the Innovation Marketplace for Human Rights, together with the constant promotion of human rights awareness, through our partners, both foreign and local, from governments to NGOs, from media and the academe, drives home a very simple and clear message – that human rights issues are not generically everyone's concern, or worse, just the government's concern, but it is a personal concern of every citizen. It all begins with admitting that extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, armed conflict, internal displacement, women and child rights, indigenous people's rights, suffrage, poverty, nutrition, education and a litany of other issues, are OUR own concerns.

After taking ownership of the problem, the natural next step is to own the solution. This is where this competition, the KaSaMa Project, suggests to us a very compelling quantum leap from the current condition of human rights problem-solving. Many have posited their solutions, but few have braved the birth of their own ideas and actualized them. The KaSaMa Project is the opportunity for many more to enter the field of human rights, not just as rights holders, but as bona

fide duty-bearers. It is the venue to create ownership and personal stakes in the fulfillment of their own innovative human rights solutions.

It seems that human rights solutions have reached an impasse, a situation where we do not know if we are moving forward with the methods we have in place. Many proposals for funding do not deviate much from training-workshop-seminars. While no one doubts that educating people is the first of obvious solutions to many problems, there comes a time when progress must be more than forthcoming. It must be evident, else we adjust the obvious and already-implemented solutions. In the end, someone must take ownership of this assessment of the human rights programs. We, the stakeholders present here today, must take ownership of our inability to reasonably measure the effect, success or failure, of many of our human rights endeavors.

Let us refer back to the Dutch and flooding. While dikes, dams and water-pumping devices have been at their disposal for centuries, there comes a time when the water simply cannot be held back, especially against this backdrop of climate change. If the dullness of enthusiasm, myopic foresight and blurriness of vision I mentioned earlier were the order of the day, then the future solutions of the Dutch will remain to be higher dikes, more dams and infinitely more water-pumping devices.

Just as if we, ourselves, in relations to the human rights situation, fall prey to the same dullness of enthusiasm, myopic foresight, blurriness of vision, societal and governmental inertia, can you guess what solutions we might conjure up in the future when it will become apparent that human rights violations cannot be quelled and held back? Will it be more training-workshop-seminars? Will it be more of the same solutions we already have in place? Will it be more rules and more executive issuances and even more legislation?

Today, the Dutch have devised the unthinkable. They will resort to purposeful flooding of low-lying residential lands when the Rhine overflows. It is not by an act of God, but by the rational act of man that entire villages will be placed underwater. But the solution does not end there. Houses in these low-lying plains are of lightweight materials, built upon foundations of ballast tanks tethered to an immovable concrete base. When the floodwaters come rushing in, the entire village, instead of going underwater, floats above water – a virtual Venice facing the North Sea. This, among others, is their unthinkable solution to flooding.

What we hope to achieve in the realm of human rights protection here in our own country, through this Innovation Marketplace Competition, is to create that launchpad for new and creative ideas and approaches to human rights issues. As stated in the competition fliers, we are in need of fresh and cutting-edge strategies. But what the posters and fliers do not explicitly say is that what we really need are the most unthinkable ideas, as unthinkable as the Dutch engineering solutions. We need ideas that not only challenge our ingenuity, but challenge our fixed conceptions about our solutions, conceptions of our culture, history, our perceptions of power and the minimum standards of dignity. Ladies and gentlemen, what we need is the unthinkable.

The truth to the human rights situation in the country is that we may be at some purgatory, neither here nor there, where as a people, we wonder how it can be that the more things change, proverbially, the more they stay the same. We may very well find ourselves stuck in an unpalatable, virtual black hole of human rights advancement, where the more freedom we seem to gain over the decades, the more encroachments we unearth, the more ennui, apathy and resignation we find around us.

But this is not the case everywhere. There are many who have taken ownership of the

solutions that have challenged old conceptions of human rights protection and promotion. One such solution creating tidal waves of change is the whole concept of micro-financing. Who would have thought that entrepreneurship and the ends of stock and profit enterprises could be seamlessly combined with the social ends of access to wealth, capital and self-sustainability for the poor? Social welfare and service have forever been characterized as a lay ministry of avowed self-impoverishment, that those who choose to help must deny themselves of any gain or wealth out of guilt, thereby effectively filtering out most of an educated and ambitious segment of our population. This does not have to be the case anymore. Wealth and social development, profitability and community welfare are effortlessly spoken in the same breath.

This is only one of many projects that have made an impact on the human rights landscape. However, given the breadth of our red-flag human rights issues, much, much more must be done. The competition is not far-reaching by any stretch. The proposals that we seek are short-term interventions. They are grassroot projects that cannot be undertaken on a massive scale. However, we are not looking for a broadside impact that will change the landscape overnight. We are looking to test the most brilliant, innovative and promising proposals, as small as they may be, with the hope that the most effective ones may be the birth of extraordinary endeavors that will, in the future, deliver the most profound changes to our society.

The solutions must be our own, driven by an unshakable will to deliver the promise of freedom and human rights for every person. They must be brave, bold and very importantly, they must have measurable parameters of success. They must be in the realm of the unthinkable, as we may very well be at the edge of conventional solutions already. And to paraphrase JFK, the change we seek must be fueled by human dignity as our purpose, the human heart as our compassionate response, and the human mind as the source of our limitless power to innovate for the sole purpose of uplifting of our people.

To our organizers, The Asia Foundation, and all our foreign partners, I tender my sincerest and most heartfelt expression of gratitude for all your efforts and support. The prospective fruits of the search for the most innovative human rights initiatives elicits both excitement and anxiousness. It is exciting in that we may find truly brilliant projects worthy of our support and financial backing. It elicits anxiousness because the prospect of finding something that may potentially be of the magnitude of a societal upheaval, and of finding allies in hardy individuals and organizations guided by the same ends of social justice and human rights promotion, may just be the turning of the tides that we have been in search of for so long. This air of potential about the KaSaMa Project injects an invigorating energy in the human rights movement of the country.

To our prospective entrants into the competition, I wish you all the best of luck.

To all of us present here today, may we be peddlers of large dreams, unimaginable innovations and frontiers of freedom and human rights, as of yet, unreachable. Our determined and collective effort towards true human rights protection for the Filipino nation and for all peoples, after all, evokes dreams that are never too large, innovations never too unimaginable, and frontiers never too unreachable.

Thank you and good day!