

Retrospect -Tagaytay Conference 2006

- by Bikash Chowdhury Barua

Mabuhai ! Filipino word for Welcome!



Tagaytay City, located 2,500 feet above the sea level with its wonderful and eye-catching landscape welcomed us to discuss, debate and suggest on the most burning issue of the day today - ‘migration and development’-round the globe. The four day conference held at the Development Academy of Philippines (DAP) in Tagaytay City on 24-27 May 2006 dealt not only with remittance and its glittering aspects, but also the inhuman sufferings and toils being undergone by millions of migrants world wide and their families left behind.

The Tagaytay conference was the follow-up event of Zacatecas (Mexico) conference where Filipinos laid the grounds for an Asian version of the Zacatecas conference. The Tagaytay conference titled “Converging initiatives and best practices in harnessing migrants’ philanthropy, investment and remittances for local economic development” was organised by INAFI Asia and INAFI Philippines and powered by Oxfam-Novib, the Netherlands.

Journey to Tagaytay:- Although we were provided with some information on Tagaytay city, to be honest I did not have the time to go through those information prior to my departure. Instead, I spent more time going through the migrant related write-ups, information- a subject on which BASUG’s experience was not a very old enough. Although most participants who flew with us were exhausted following the non-stop 12 hours air journey, I didn’t feel that tired. Contrary to it journey by mini bus from the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (Manila airport) to Tagaytay city was rather a bit tiring, although the later part of the journey, especially when we left Manila behind, was worth enjoying. My all exhaustion was gone when we entered into Tagaytay city with its wonderful landscape and hilly zigzag ways. It is a city with an excellent vantage point of Taal Lake and Volcano. Taal Lake which is widely

known as ‘a lake within an island within a lake’ fascinated me so much that whenever I got time after the conference I hired a small size local typical transport and went around the hilly sites.

Personally I benefited a lot from the ‘volcanic’ discussions held during the conference. It was an ‘eye opener’ for me representing a small but active migrant organisation in the Netherlands. And for this, I on behalf of BASUG (Bangladesh Support Group) express heartfelt thanks to Oxfam-Novib, Ms. Leila Rispens-Noel, Programme Officer in particular who was the master mind behind this grand international event.



The conference heard the experiences of a number of migrant groups belonging to various nationalities- Chinese, Philippines, Bangladeshi, Indian, Mexican, Latin American and the African. And each story is different from the other.

The conference discussed in detail many issues among them were: overseas emigration is an option, not a necessity; ways to turn remittance to sustained development for migrants and their families; reformulated banking services for the migrants; labour migration; migrants rights, human aspects of the migrant workers and their families, especially the children affected due to separation from their parents and involvement of the micro-financial institutions in the remittance transfer process to widen financial access to the poor.



The conference was not confined within the four walls of the DAP. The participants were taken to places to get themselves acquainted with the life-style of the family members left behind by the migrant workers. The experience that I gathered at the Municipal hall at Mabini Batang was totally new and an unexpected one. Before witnessing the performance by the children of the emigrated workers, I did not know that behind their laughter, smiles there were so many sad stories, woes- kids have not been receiving proper guidance, getting stray, guardians (in most cases fathers) indulge in bad things such as drink, woman, gambling etc. It may be mentioned that of the 80 million population 8% is living abroad as migrant workers and most surprisingly 60% of them are women.

Visit to the Italian village at San Pablo, Laguna- amidst the green forest and hilly site the villas were to many of our fellow participants eye-catching. But to me, to be honest, I felt a deep sigh of sadness and sufferings in all those eye-catching buildings, made in Italian style, as most migrants from this area live in Italy. The children living in these beautiful villas seemed to me to be not properly cared upon. I was wondering if the separation following the emigration



for the so-called better life has really been able to bring any real and meaningful life to these left-behind family members. This was echoed by the renowned and adored Filipino journalist, columnist Prof. Randolph David in his speech on the concluding day of the Tagaytay conference. Prof. Randolph presented a vivid picture of both the sides of the coin- the good and the bad. Comparing the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) with oil he said, “The OFW is to the Philippines as oil is to Indonesia. But there is a big difference between selling people and selling oil. On the positive side, Saudi Arabia, or Brunei, or Indonesia, may run out of oil in the next 25 years depending on the rate at which they pump it out of the earth. We will never run out of people, since we keep producing them at a rate faster than most other countries. The downside of this is that oil extraction, unlike the export of people, leaves negligible side-effects on the institutions and culture of a people. A society that exports people rather than commodities on a scale that the Philippines does, undercuts its own way of life.”

What is more hard to accept but true is when Prof Randolph very correctly said, “We talk of local companies and industries losing their specialized workforce. But we seldom talk of communities losing their artisans, of children losing their parents, of aging parents losing their children, of spouses losing one another, of a nation losing entire generations. Sending out people almost always means wrenching them away from their loved ones. The effects of such separations on the psyche of children and on the consciousness of the nation are hard to assess.” What Prof. Randolph said is not only applicable in the case of the Philippines, but I think is equally applicable to all manpower exporting countries including Bangladesh where I come from.

Visit to the Athika office, Coco centre helped us get an idea as to see how the huge coconuts grown in the area could be used into an income generating programme. It was also an added experience to see that some rooms at the Athika office were named after the migrant donors. I may add here that this is already in practice in many parts of Bangladesh. But unfortunately this practice still remains confined within religious fields and not in such initiatives like Athika. BASUG will in future try to encourage the Bangladeshi emigrants to go for such people-oriented programme in order to bring help the poor.



Minus points:- First of all the whole conference was a big success. There is no doubt about it. But to my overall observation, the time allotted for the group discussion on the final day was not adequate and when all the groups came back to the main hall, the conclusions seemed to have drawn hurriedly, giving less chance to hear the comments of the others.



And I am wondering if the conference has been able to come up with a migrant-driven action plan. A 12-members working group was however formed later on the final day with me as one of its members. But nothing was decided as to how to start, where to start and who will have the whistle to initiate the next step. Such global or regional conference in the future should seriously stress the need for implementation of the bilateral agreements between the sending and the host countries to ensure the basic rights of the migrant workers. I can not resist myself from quoting Prof. Randolph again in this regard as to me he had said more appropriately what my words can express.

“What is distressing is that we have not increased our institutional mechanism for overseeing the needs of our compatriots abroad and defending their rights as guest workers. The best protection of all is afforded by a bilateral agreement with the receiving countries that would at the minimum secure for our workers those rights that are provided by the UN Charter on Migrant Workers. On the whole, we have not been successful in securing such bilateral agreements. That is why our workers are in the main left on their own to defend themselves from these abuses. I would think that it is the height of irresponsibility for any government to deploy its people for work abroad if it cannot assure them the basic protection of their human rights. In general, our people thrive well abroad. They work hard, are loyal and dependable, they value their jobs, and are much appreciated. The companies and institutions they serve abroad sometimes wonder how any country can cavalierly dispense the services of such a gifted people. But that’s precisely what makes us a unique nation – a hardworking people run by unworthy leaders. There’s nothing wrong with our people; everything is wrong with our government, with our politicians, and with the leadership of our key institutions.” Bangladesh and its leaders are no different to it.

Last but not the least apart from learning many new things on migration and development, the Tagaytay conference has helped me widen my knowledge, helped BASUG, the organisation which I represent, helped widen our network with many migrant organisations, individuals working or involved in the areas.



Looking forward to hearing on the next conference, possibly the Africa conference.



SALAMAT (KEEP WELL)

*(Photos by Bikash Chowdhury Barua, President of BASUG (Bangladesh Support Group).
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