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'Classrooms and clean-up' plan

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Jonathan De la Cruz

More than just the monies set aside for the "Classrooms and Clean-Up" (C & C) Plan, two projects which have been in the news lately, it is the promotion of the values of responsible citizenship, volunteerism and environmental protection which make them worthy endeavors. The Classrooms part involves Pagcor's "Matuwid na Daan sa Silid Aralan" aimed at mitigating the perennial classroom shortage in our public elementary and secondary schools while the Clean-up one partakes of the tripartite effort (government, both national and local, private corporations/businessmen and the community and its army of volunteers) to bring life and rescue the Marilao-Meycauayan-Obando River System (MMORS) from entombment as one of the world's dirtiest river systems.

To borrow a phrase from the Palace, these monies are well spent and the initiatives very much deserving of duplication, here and abroad.

Take the Matuwid na Daan sa Silid Aralan, Pagcor's novel classrooms building project. Quite apart from the P1 billion seed money put up by the gaming agency which was actually generated from its cost savings program involving, among others, discarding the coffee plan for so-called customers, seen or unseen, which cost it at least P1billion during the previous administration, the project imbibes a values orientation which inspires volunteerism and communal respect for the classrooms to be built. This bayanihan oriented undertaking gives the communities and the students the kind of stake in the structures to be built which no amount of lectures may provide. We will now have classrooms benefiting no less than 50,000 students initially funded by Pagcor and built to last with the added sweat contribution of the community. These will definitely be treasured because they are created by the community — not merely donated to the community — and thus even more conducive to learning.

In addition, Pagcor has also provided an initial P100 million funding for the P-Noy Bayanihan project in partnership with DepEd, DENR, and Tesda aimed at producing thousands of school desks from DENR's confiscated, illegally-procured logs. The Pagcor start-up money is being used to retrofit existing Tesda and DepEd facilities and establish more woodworking units nationwide. Again, aside from the employment opportunities in production sites, active community participation and development becomes a reality through extensive Tesda skills and values training.

Finally, the agency has also found better use of its old slot machine stands. Instead of letting these rot in its warehouses, the stands were remodeled to become desks for public schools. Hundreds of the recycled stands are now being used by elementary students in Metro Manila and Cavite. How's that kind of change from just a gaming monopoly intent on satisfying the needs of its customers (like having coffee, for instance) into one promoting good education, bayanihan and good community relations and environmental protection, among others.

If only for these, it is clear that Pagcor and its Chairman, Cristino "Bong" Naguiat Jr., have apparently moved on after being caught in the middle of that intra-corporate battle of the giants in the gaming industry dubbed L'Affaire Okada. That's one good news worth the wait.

The clean-up part. The Clean-Up plan for the MMORS, one of the world's most

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polluted river systems, involves national and local government units, private corporations/business people and the community and its army of volunteers getting together and putting up a 10-year program to bring life to the river all over again. The plan which has been in the making for years on end finally got a boost when Bulacan Gov. Willie Alvarado and the mayors of the MMORS' influenced areas, including Valenzuela City Mayor Sherwin Gatchalian, sat down with DENR Secretary Ramon Paje and his Region III staff and the private sector which included Ambassador Antonio Cabangon Chua and his ALC Group of Companies, gave the the green light.

The ALC Group brought in a number of experts including officials of the New York based Blacksmith Institute (BI) to confer with the MMORS Task Force and prepare for possible development assistance from a number of multilateral and even bilateral funding institutions. In addition and this act really got the MMORS Task Force and BI to accelerate things, the ALC Group which is putting up a state-of-the-art engineered sanitary landfill in Barangay Salambao, Obando, decided to donate a one hectare property in Meycauayan which will serve as the site of a septage treatment facility which will, in effect, serve as the repository and processing bin for the toxic river waste. What's more, the ALC Group through EcoShield, its engineered sanitary landfill subsidiary, has also pledged to dedicate at least 35 percent of its landfill capacity to accommodate toxic river waste.

The experts noted that such a facility was one of the critical missing links in the earlier effort to clean- up the MMORS. They advised that without such a septage treatment facility, any effort to clean-up would be an unforgivable token undertaking as the toxic river waste would be simply recycled back as waste into the river. Now, with this one hectare facility, the heaviest pollutants will be treated properly and when discharged back into the system would definitely lower its toxicity until such time that the recycled "good" water would kind of overwhelm the "toxic" waste and turn the river into a living one all over again.

This arduous and definitely back breaking process has become very critical if we are to prevent the MMORS turning into a watery fire, as the experts call it, since it was ascertained that its toxicity has the potential of getting too heavy and hazardous it may just ignite conflagration if no drastic effort to clean it up is put in place. The sooner, the better.

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