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CORRUPTION-FREE ODA PROGRAMS: A NATIONAL PRIORITY

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Official Development Assistance (ODA), though sourced from abroad, is the money of the Filipino people. These precious resources are negotiated in the name of the Republic, for the national interest, and for development to improve the quality of life of all the people. These funds are not intended for illicit private gain.

Corruption in the Philippines has been repeatedly criticized at home and in international reports, most recently in a World Bank assessment that rated the Philippines as the most corrupt country in East Asia. In yet another report, Transparency International has downgraded our country to being among the most corrupt in the world. The scourge of corruption has even reportedly penetrated the ODA field.

It is urgent, therefore, that we address the problem of corruption-tainted ODA in our country. Corruption and other illegalities siphon away the money of the people, and rob them of a better future that should be theirs by right.

The time for action is especially urgent now for other reasons. First, there has been a steady downward trend in global ODA. Sooner or later, this will affect the Philippines if this is not already happening. Second, given the current food and fuel crises, an expected global economic slowdown, and increasing pressure on Government revenues, our country has a greater need to utilize ODA more efficiently and effectively than in the past.

Although the Government must take the lead in deciding the general direction and priorities for our country's national development plan, the Government is not the only actor in our national development. Philippine Civil Society has had a long and honorable history of active involvement in development projects from the local to the national level through the years. For example, the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP) has supported some 6,000 development projects with about four million beneficiaries nationwide.

In addition, there is a newer phenomenon: the charitable and humanitarian efforts carried out, in cash, in kind and in personal service, by the vast Overseas Filipino Community. Every year, Filipinos abroad organize free medical and dental clinics, social and educational assistance, community service, and donation drives for emergency relief and rehabilitation to help ease the terrible human suffering caused by natural disasters. The most successful large-scale effort involving extensive participation by and contributions from Overseas Filipinos is the celebrated *Gawad Kalinga* program that is building houses, schools and communities for tens of thousands of poor Filipinos.

Another extremely important new anti-poverty initiative is the PinoyME, a private sector consortium organized by former President Cory Aquino, which is intended to provide capacity-building for micro-finance institutions to scale up micro-finance in the Philippines. With rising costs, increasing unemployment and falling levels of investment, supporting alternative means of livelihood, especially for the marginalized sectors of our society, has become a national imperative, which PinoyME and other private sector and non-governmental entities can help to effectively address.

In order to maximize the proper use of ODA, the International Development Cooperation Community --- governments, international organizations, NGO's, churches, local communities, media and academe --- must do more to embrace Philippine Civil Society and Overseas Filipinos as full-time development partners. These non-governmental participants can help ensure that every peso spent will have the greatest possible beneficial effect at the frontlines of development, on the ground, and in the communities that need the most assistance.

Futhermore, encouraging greater non-governmental involvement in the development process will help improve the accountability of government, the transparency of development projects and programs, the matching of scarce ODA resources with focused objectives, and most important of all, the ownership at grassroots level of all development cooperation initiatives.

Our International Donor Community, therefore, should insist on greater participation by these non-governmental partners throughout the development process, from the formulation of policy to project implementation. Their unique insights, field experience, socially responsible citizenship and patriotic civic activism should be more closely integrated into the country's foreign assistance programs.

Aid effectiveness, transparency and accountability should be the common objectives of all Filipinos and of all foreign assistance providers for all development cooperation initiatives. Given our nation's grave economic circumstances, we must no longer tolerate inadequate oversight and poor selection and monitoring of foreign assistance projects. Waste, loss and corruption must not be allowed to further sap the economic vitality of our country. Anything less would be a betrayal of the Filipino people.

It behooves us, as well, to take this and every other opportunity to thank our friends in the International Donor Community for supporting our country, despite many challenges, over the years. We call on them to maintain their faith in the Filipino people.

At the same time, we should seize the moment to seek early relief and assistance for the poorest of our poor – the more than 30% or 5 million Filipino families who live below the poverty line. While good governance reforms as envisaged by programs such as the Millennium Challenge Account of the United States are vital, their full realization may take many years.

The Filipino people should not be made to endure such a long wait. We call on our foreign development cooperation partners, therefore, to fast-track and to focus their humanitarian, social relief, livelihood promotion and income generation projects and programs on our poor and disadvantaged sectors. To achieve this objective, working with Civil Society and Filipinos abroad should be expanded to optimize the efficient, fast, targeted and transparent delivery of assistance. With their low administrative costs, real world experience, established grassroots networks, and civic spirit and commitment, these non-governmental participants can be highly effective development partners.

We affirm that Philippine Civil Society and the Overseas Filipino Community are prepared to take up this challenge. We stand ready for a deeper engagement with our foreign friends in advancing the welfare of our countrymen.

(The article reflects the personal opinion of the author and does not reflect the official stand of the Management Association of the Philippines. The author is Past President of the Management Association of the Philippines and Chair of Gotuaco del Rosario & Associates. Feedback at map@globelines.com.ph. For previous articles, please visit <map.org.ph>.)