

Digital and other divides in a developing country

Comment >
Education and development

Social reformers everywhere agree that education is part of the long-term answer to such intractable problems as gender discrimination, sexually-transmitted diseases, environmental degradation, even social and economic inequities. The following article is excerpted from the author's keynote presentation at the Seventh International Conference on Philippine Studies, delivered in Leiden, the Netherlands, on 16 June 2004.

By Edilberto C. de Jesus

The East Asian miracle, heralded by the emergence of the dragon economies, enshrined education as the key to economic development and global competitiveness. Tremendous strides in the last two decades in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), together with the sometimes extravagant claims of the ICT priesthood, bolstered the faith in education and gave hope to developing countries. Exploiting the late-starter advantage, Third World countries could perhaps use ICT to catch up with, or, in the image popular during the Ramos Administration, 'pole-vault' over wealthier nations.

Digital divide

It did not take long for reality to bite. Building the ICT infrastructure, acquiring the software, and keeping the system up to date do not come cheap. For schools and countries lacking in resources, ICT turned out to be as much a threat as a promise. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration coined the term 'digital divide' to denote the gap between the ICT haves and have nots.

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Cost is not the only, or even the main, issue. The installation of computer hardware and internet connectivity does not instantly translate into better learning outcomes in schools. Both students and faculty must traverse a learning curve on the use of ICT. Moreover, proponents of ICT tend to underestimate the prerequisite competencies in language and math that students must acquire to learn the technology and profit from it. Despite these reservations, ICT is important, and the digital divide is something we should try to narrow. But developing countries like the Philippines must confront and overcome other divides.

Other divides

Elections have a way of exposing and sharpening divisions in society. The summary of the exit polls conducted by the Social Weather Station (SWS) called attention to persisting regional and linguistic fault lines. On national television, SWS President Mahar Mangahas commented that the Kapampangans, Cebuanos, and Ilongos defeated the Tagalogs and the Ilocanos, alluding to the regions carried with large margins by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Ferdinand Poe, Jr.

The Huntington Clash of Civilizations thesis, the 9/11 attack, and the invasion of Iraq have highlighted the historical Christian-Muslim divide in the Philippines and complicated negotiations

between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The elections also exposed fissures within the Christian flock, with different sects enjoining their adherents to vote for specific candidates.

The most serious rift in Philippine society remains that between the rich and the poor. Impeached President Erap Estrada exploited this divide in his campaign for the presidency, even after his expulsion from the Palace. Pro-Estrada partisans attempted to project the clash with Arroyo allies as a class war between rich and poor.

The Rulemakers

A recent study of the legislature, *The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-Born Dominate Congress*, focuses on the political dimension of this social divide, asserting that 'a congress of well-connected and well-born multimillionaires sets the rules for a poor nation' (p. viii). Service in the legislature provides ample opportunity for amassing wealth. Legislators receive allowances (e.g. for travel, staff, consultancy contracts) free from the scrutiny of the Commission on Audit, making the Philippine parlia-

ment the only agency of the government, according to the Presidential Commission against Graft and Corruption, that is 'not accountable for the public funds it spends' (p. 144).

In addition to the public funds they receive, legislators are free to pursue professional and business interests. About half the legislators have declared business interests in real estate, but the authors of *Rulemakers* estimate as many as 70 per cent are involved in construction through nominees or dummy companies. The power to make laws and to conduct investigations 'in aid of legislation' can also be employed to advance personal and family interests. To protect accumulated wealth, it becomes convenient to keep the elective office within the family. Anticipating this danger, the 1987 Cory Constitution sought to abort the birth of political dynasties by imposing a three-term limit on legislators.

Politicians have responded by enlisting relatives to succeed them. Two-thirds of legislators in the post-Marcos congresses are members of political families. Seventy per cent are second and third generation politicians. The pattern of parents and children or spouses succeeding each other prompts the book's observation on 'the incestuousness within Congress'.

Rulemakers underlines the potentially serious divide between the elected and

the electorate. The country's system of representative democracy, it argues, is unrepresentative and, therefore, not democratic in its processes or results. During the protracted canvassing of presidential votes, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, Archbishop of Manila, asserted on cable television that politicians have become the most destructive force in Philippine life.

The education divide

The cleavages among the community and the fault lines in the socio-economic and political terrain place the digital divide in perspective. It is important, but other divisions pose greater dangers. The issue is how the Filipinos as a people and how the government as the instrument of the community will proceed to repair the breaks, close the wounds and reunite the country. Those who lament the failure of democracy to produce effective leaders committed to the welfare of the people tend to blame the uneducated electorate. We thus come full circle, back to the core conviction that schools provide the long-term answer to building the strong, cohesive republic to which the country aspires. What we confront in the schools, tragically, is not just a digital divide but an education divide.

The poor place a high priority on schooling because they believe that education will enable their children to escape the bondage of poverty. Government and the media, even the entertainment media, nurture this belief, promoting education as the great equalizer. And there are enough success stories showing that, through education, people can improve their lot, rise above the station into which they were born, and ensure a better future for their children.

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As early as the 1980s, however, thoughtful educators had begun to suspect that this faith was illusory³. The number of unemployed or underemployed college graduates provides a clue. The problem may stem from the limited capacity of the market to absorb graduates because of the state of the economy. But it could equally arise from the limited ability of graduates to meet the requirements of the job market.

We must close the gap at all educational levels between the elite schools and the diploma mills in both the private and public sectors. Reform must start with the basic education system, the only level that about half of the student age population will complete. If we fail to close this gap, education will create and sustain greater inequalities. Education will become the great disqualifier.

Balancing the goals of access or equity and quality in education has emerged as a major concern, both among the South-east Asian Ministers of Education Organization and the more numerous UNESCO countries. Rapid progress in the knowledge industry keeps raising the bar countries must surmount to meet quality education standards. Under conditions of resource constraints, access and quality often become competing objectives.

could give their children the benefit of eleven years of basic education.

An initiative launched by President Macapagal-Arroyo on 11 April 2004 forges a connection between education, livelihood and poverty reduction. The government has committed to giving each family falling below the poverty line a scholarship and living allowance to send one child to college or a technical-vocational school.

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In recent years, ranking in international assessments have become, like GNP and GDP, new benchmarks of development. We cannot evade the responsibility of measuring and monitoring the distance that separates us from evolving global educational standards. But our greater concern ought to be the educational divide within our own societies. Computer literacy is a desirable objective. But functional literacy and numeracy must take precedence. There are still 860 million illiterate people in the world. ICT can help in addressing their needs. But especially for countries devastated by war, famine and disease, the benefits of ICT in schools are academic and irrelevant without further external assistance.

Building an effective educational system is a long-term task requiring sustained effort and considerable financial resources. But focusing on education does offer a silver lining. Addressing problems in education does begin to resolve some of the other major divides.

This school year, the Department introduced the Bridge Program to give children entering public high schools the

These initiatives will not solve all of the problems the Philippines faces in education; they are not quick-fix solutions, not magic bullets. But they do point the education establishment in the right direction. With these initiatives, we hope to bridge the education divide and begin to address some of the other fault lines in the foundations of the republic. <

References

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Edilberto de Jesus stepped down as Secretary of Education in the Arroyo Administration in August 2004. He earlier served in the Cabinet of President Corazon Cojuangco Aquino. Between these appointments, he served as Associate Dean and Chair of the Policy Forum of the Asian Institute of Management and as President of the Far Eastern University, both based in Manila. He has accepted an appointment to head the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariat in Bangkok in January 2005. edejesu@yahoo.com

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