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## Watered Down: The Quest for Access in an Island Community

“I am powerless.”

Mario ruminated on his plight after waking up in the middle of the night with a troubled stomach. Mario lived in a community built for the poorest of the poor families of barangay Ticad on the idyllic island of Bantayan, Philippines. Life on the island was not easy but he had survived a lot worse before he chose to live here five years ago. His neighbors all chose to live here. Indeed, life was not perfect, but it had significantly improved.

He lived in a concrete house — a far cry from his previous dwelling made of braided nipa leaves, galvanized iron sheets, discarded boxes, and plywood sheets. His new home did not drip in the rain nor become drafty at night. It stood true during the usual tropical cyclones. There were more neighbors than before which made it easier to borrow items that the family lacked. There was more space to move around, and communal facilities were slowly coming into being. Mario truly appreciated this and he believed his neighbors did, too.

Yet, Mario was not as happy as could be expected. The change in abode came with changes in the rules. There was more distance to his place of work — the sea. Most of his friends and neighbors were fishermen, too. Additionally, Gawad Kalinga<sup>1</sup>, the non-government organization charged with community development, had set up rules for the community. A myriad of things kept Mario unhappy including lack of access to potable water.

Mario had lived around shorelines most of his life. He washed his hands, the kitchen utensils, and sometimes his clothes with sea water. In the old days, potable water was available with only a short walk to the public well. Now, in his new concrete home, turning on the water faucet was more convenient, but it demanded that the family save up to pay the water bill, which previously had been free. Mario was only earning an average of Php 200 (USD 4.30<sup>i</sup>) per day to feed his family of four with two school-aged kids. Food took most of his earnings. Daily expenses had to be adjusted according to what was left. Soon, the subsidy for the electrical power for the water pump would end. He had to factor that in, too. Some days, he thought he was not living his life — he was merely surviving.

Yet now, he and his neighbors had a new opportunity: they could receive a solar grid that would help provide electrical power to the community. The key to getting this solar grid, however, was that the community had to develop a business proposal for how they would use the electrical power. It was a big opportunity – but the community had to identify priorities. What would be the best way to make use of the new electrical power?

### Against the Tide

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It had all begun in the summer of 2011. Gawad Kalinga pulled together volunteers from all over the world for the biggest *bayanihan* (work of heroes) event in the nation. The Bayani Challenge was a five-day event consisting of house building, school re-furbishing and painting, tree planting, coastline cleaning, eco-tourism, and other fun challenges. The house building activity was at barangay Ticad in the municipality of Bantayan. Mario heard about the event and decided to explore the possibility of gaining his own home. Eight concrete row houses were started at the Bayani Challenge event. Mario participated in the challenge to secure a place as one of the first residents of the new community.<sup>2</sup>

The local government of the municipality of Bantayan donated a portion of the land and did the initial site development. Gawad Kalinga provided the manpower for the community planning, organizing, and training of the residents for the completion of construction of the row houses left unfinished after the Bayani Challenge event.<sup>3</sup> The would-be residents rendered a total of 3,000 hours of community service as sweat equity before being allowed to occupy the houses. With one arm paralyzed, Mario took time off his work to serve in the building of his house and the development of the community. The sweat came easy with the possibility of a better home.<sup>4</sup>

### Gawad Kalinga

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Gawad Kalinga Community Development Foundation, Inc. was officially established in 2003, but its work had started informally in 1994, building a youth camp in the biggest slum area in Metro Manila.<sup>5</sup> Its core activities historically embraced building relationships with poor Filipino families living in slum areas. It committed its resources to building communities, organizing the residents, and empowering them to build a new life. Its success was due mainly to its network of volunteers who remained the biggest asset of the organization.<sup>6</sup>

Gawad Kalinga was a donations-based organization. The management team of the Gawad Kalinga, Cebu planned the infrastructure to be built in the 13 communities around Cebu. The needs of the each

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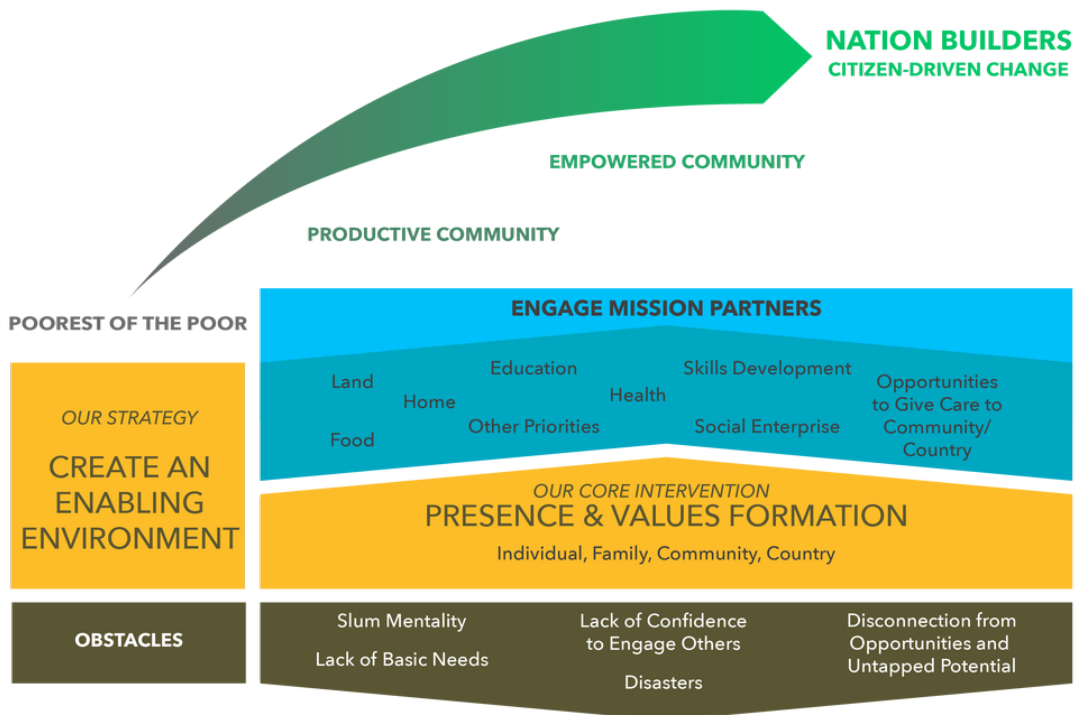
<sup>i</sup> Php 46.50 = USD 1.00 as of 3 June 2016.

community were assessed periodically through focus group discussions, surveys, and needs assessments, and specific requests of donors were paired up with the assessed need of a community.<sup>7</sup>

Gawad Kalinga intended to end the poverty of 5 million poor families by 2024<sup>8</sup>, with its core intervention being the transformation of the community as shown in **Exhibit 1**. Through these empowered communities, most residents connected with mainstream services and opportunities.

**Exhibit 1**

Gawad Kalinga Model of Building Communities



Source: Gawad Kalinga, "Our Model" accessed October 18, 2016 <http://www.gk1world.com/our-model>

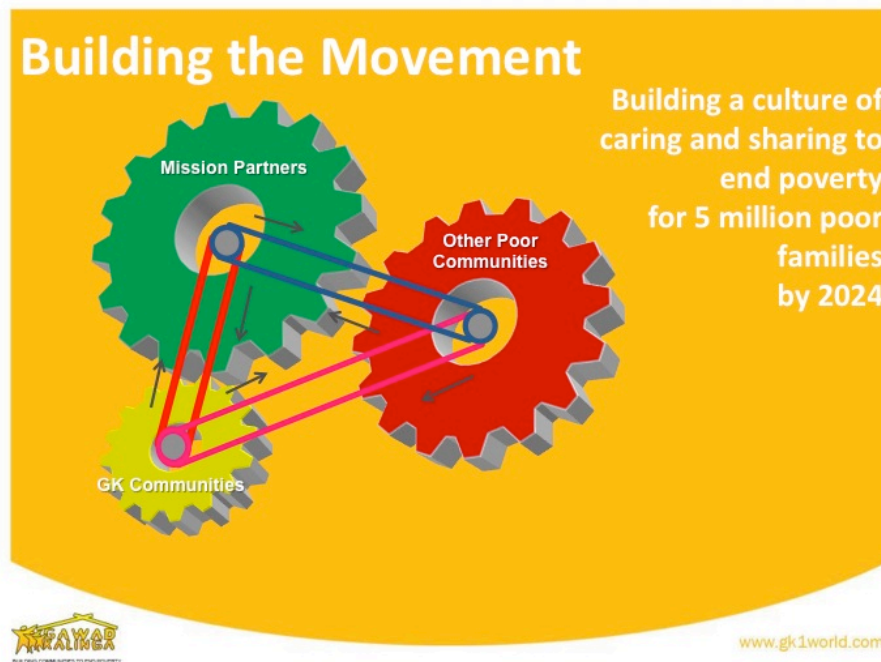
The Gawad Kalinga (GK) Way was to build a culture of caring and sharing by engaging the mission partners<sup>ii</sup>, the Gawad Kalinga communities, and other poor communities as shown in **Exhibit 2**. By partnering with local government units and creating a network of local *bayanis* (heroes) to assist one poor family at a time, Gawad Kalinga sought to end the poverty of 5 million families by 2024. Mario had become part of this network of bayanis.<sup>9</sup>

*"Kami nga dugay na nga namuyo dinhi nakasabot kung unsa ang gilantaw sa GK nga mga kinaiya namo isip usa ka nga maayong lungsuranon (We who have lived here long enough understand the habits GK hoped that we practice as good residents of a community),"* quipped Mario.<sup>10</sup>

ii Mission partners were institutions who collaborated with GK develop programs to eradicate poverty.

## Exhibit 2

### Gawad Kalinga Model of Building the Movement



Source: Gawad Kalinga, "Building the Movement" accessed October 18, 2016 <http://www.gk1world.com/our-model>

Gawad Kalinga (GK) communities were present in almost all provinces of the country. Even in the most troubled and war-torn areas, GK communities were known as zones of peace. As its response to marginalization, Gawad Kalinga created economies within its communities to promote justice and fairness. Its approach to social entrepreneurship communities started with the belief of no one was to be left behind.<sup>11</sup> GK built homes, villages and worked with local government to launch food sufficiency programs.<sup>12</sup>

### Local Municipal Government of Bantayan

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In 2011, the local government took the initiative to offer a portion of the municipal subdivision land as the site for a new Gawad Kalinga community. When the houses were turned over to the recipients like Mario, the government temporarily subsidized the payment for electricity bills for the houses and water pump.<sup>13</sup>

Bantayan Electric Cooperative, Inc. (BANELCO) started its service in 1983 and provided electrical power to the whole island in the intervening years. An electric-powered light at home was a welcomed change in the life of Mario. His oldest memories of island life were brightened mainly by the lights of the moon and the stars and sometimes by kerosene lamps. It made life easy. Nevertheless, the effective electric power rate was one of the highest in the region at Php 11.3758 per kilowatt-hour (inclusive of value-added taxes) for residential lighting as of July 2016.<sup>14</sup>

Then disaster struck in 2013. The super typhoon Yolanda laid waste to the whole island. Mario had to contend with a community in disarray. There were not enough resources to address the unravelling crisis. The availability of basic necessities was severely limited. Mario made do with well water for daily use; the motor pump could not be powered to deliver water to the homes. Life was a daily struggle until normalcy returned almost a year later.<sup>15</sup>

During these months of struggle, the mayor of the town of Bantayan decided to award most of the land in the community for development and management to Gawad Kalinga (Cebu). Gawad Kalinga set to work to find donors for the row houses to be constructed. It would house most of those evacuated from the enforced danger zone at least 20 meters from shoreline. On an island, this was a severe restriction and affected the life of a lot of fisher folk.<sup>16</sup>

### A New Opportunity: Solar Power

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From less than 10 families, the community now had grown to 174 families. The diaspora created a small crisis on its own. At the height of the humanitarian crises on the island, many international NGOs worked to lend a hand in the rehabilitation and renewal of community life. Project Enkindle from the National University of Singapore was one such NGO. Project Enkindle identified the Gawad Kalinga Ticao community as one of the recipients of a 5-kW solar micro-grid system complete with infrastructure, solar panels, batteries, charge controllers, and inverters. Installation and training of personnel was also covered. The caveat to winning this opportunity was that the community had to provide a business proposal for usage of the system.<sup>17</sup>

A focus-group discussion among the residents was conducted to assess which needs the beneficiaries identified as the ones to be addressed by the solar power system and which of these needs were to be given priority. The community identified the three greatest needs: powering the water pump, lighting the streets at night, and operational needs of the cooperative store.

The officers of the community were then tasked to create a business plan and to present their plan to the general assembly<sup>18</sup>.

### Deciding the Flow

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*“Maayo ni kay kitay gipangutana kung unsa atong gusto (This is good that we are asked what we want),”* remarked Mario.<sup>19</sup>

The community illustrated their outputs on a sheet of manila paper and presented it to the general assembly. A brainstorming activity followed after every group had presented.<sup>20</sup>

Mario felt he could finally dream of bigger things within the community. He believed he and the rest of his neighbors could make the right decision about how to make best use of the new solar grid system. The question was: how should the community prioritize among the three greatest needs? Should they use the grid to power the water pump, to provide lighting for the community streets at night, or to use it to power the cooperative store?

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Gawad Kalinga Official Website. Accessed 26 July 2016. <<http://www.gk1world.com/home>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Mario. Resident of Gawad Kalinga Ticad community. Personal interview. 9 April 2016
- <sup>3</sup> Florendo, Toby. head of Gawad Kalinga (Cebu). Personal interview. 16 April 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Mario. Resident of Gawad Kalinga Ticad community. Personal interview. 9 April 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Gawad Kalinga, "Our Journey" Accessed 18 October 2016. <http://www.gk1world.com/milestones>
- <sup>6</sup> Florendo.
- <sup>7</sup> Florendo.
- <sup>8</sup> Gawad Kalinga, "Our Journey" Accessed 18 October 2016. <http://www.gk1world.com/our-journey>
- <sup>9</sup> Mario. Resident of Gawad Kalinga Ticad community. Personal interview. 9 April 2016
- <sup>10</sup> Mario. Resident of Gawad Kalinga Ticad community. Personal interview. 9 April 2016
- <sup>11</sup> Gawad Kalinga, "Tenets" Accessed 18 October 2016 <http://www.gk1world.com/NewOurVision>
- <sup>12</sup> Gawad Kalinga, "Our Journey" Accessed 18 October 2016. <http://www.gk1world.com/milestones>
- <sup>13</sup> Author's experience as head of volunteer mobilization at the Gawad Kalinga (GK) Ticad community in Bantayan Island (Cebu, Philippines), 2014-2015
- <sup>14</sup> Bantayan Island Electric Cooperative, Inc. "Rates for July 2016" Accessed October 18, 2016 <http://banelcobantayan.com/rates-for-july-2016/>
- <sup>15</sup> Author's experience as head of volunteer mobilization at the Gawad Kalinga (GK) Ticad community in Bantayan Island (Cebu, Philippines), 2014-2015
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> fictional dialogue
- <sup>20</sup> Author's experience as head of volunteer mobilization at the Gawad Kalinga (GK) Ticad community in Bantayan Island (Cebu, Philippines), 2014-2015