

THE FILIPINO E-MAGAZINE IN EUROPE

Roots & wings

CULTURE PEOPLE PLACES

-on this issue-

BETSY WESTENDORP

THE VICE PRESIDENT IN LONDON

FILIPINO ARTISTS IN SWEDEN

FIT & FREE IN SIARGAO

May of 2018

Dear Kababayans

Warm welcome to
R&Ws May 2018
issue.



The season of Spring is nature's gift to mankind - suddenly, there's splendor in the grass, million flowers blooming, birds singing symphonies, fishes doing their catch-me-if-you-can jump, and best of them all, everybody wearing a warm smile. Thanks goodness for Spring!

We are all special. And yet, some of us manage to be extra special. Our artist in Focus this Spring - belongs to the latter category. Meet Ms Betsy Westendorp de Brias who recently launched an artbook brimming with her amazing artworks. Betsy started painting at the age of 10 and now at the age of 90, still continues painting. It is impossible to be unimpressed with her joie de vivre. We are overjoyed that Donna Manio, our Life Style Editor in Manila managed to get this intimate interview with Betsy. We cannot thank Betsy enough for her kindness and generosity in sharing her life and artworks with us. Please contact us if you want to buy a copy of this exquisite book.

We are happy and proud as we warmly welcome Amelia "Aimee" Alado as she joins our team as UK Editor. It's been a while since we had someone writing from the UK. Early this Spring, Aimee was present when our current Philippine Vice President Leni Robredo was a guest speaker at the London School of Economics. Thanks Aimee for this first article. About "Overcoming Poverty &

the Role of Politics in Economic Growth". We firmly believe that poverty should be highlighted in our societies that is why we think this article is a very relevant one. For if we come to think of it - how can we consider ourselves successful when there is so much poverty around us?

The Filipino Artists Association of Sweden or FAAS had their first general meeting last April 14 in Stockholm. Thanks Errah Cavallin for the inspiring story about how it all started. We wish all FAAS members lots of fun as they venture into even higher heights with their diversity and creativity.

For the Euro-Pinoy millennials we have the inspirational story of 28 years old Carl Z. Hansen, born and raised in Sweden, now working and living in Siargao. This article first appeared in ENFiD News & Views' autumn 2017 issue but we thought it was worth a reprint. A thousand thanks to Michelle Marquez and ENFiD for sharing this article with us.

Lily Fen in Switzerland, our quintessential Euro-Pinoy writer of travelogues and short stories will be a regular feature in our mag in the forthcoming issues. Thanks Lily! You simply rock!

If you have a story to share with us, especially about our communities around Europe - travels, events, projects, accomplishments, do share it with us. We love to be inspired.

Maraming salamat at Mabuhay!

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Editor-in-Chief & Founder

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contents

FEATURED ARTIST
Betsy Westendorp pg.4

COMMUNITY
Filipino Artists' Association
of Sweden, pg. 10

LITERATURE
Book Launch in Bern, pg. 14
Strange Spaces, pg. 16

PROFILE
Carl Hansen, pg. 24

PROGRESS
VP Leni in London, pg.28

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Roots&Wings Filipino Magazine in Europe

The timelessness *of* Betsy Westendorp

Fresh from the success of her book launch at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, Roots & Wings catches up with Spanish-born artist Betsy Westendorp de Brias to learn more about her art.

The renowned painter, beloved for her portraits of European royalty, vast landscapes, and floral still life, just recently celebrated her 90th birthday. Westendorp shares some thoughts on what inspires her and why she finds the internet absolutely amazing!

as interviewed told to **Donna Patricia Manio | Manila**



You were twelve when you started making portraits. What prompted you to pursue it?

When I started to paint, that was what I really wanted. Being a portrait artist, I believe, is something inborn - It's simply a matter of having the gift or not. When I had painting lessons in Madrid, the instructors knew that I was doing portraits. For my first exhibit, I actually had only portraits. So for many years, I was only doing portraits and I loved it.

Who is your favorite subject and what makes this sitter so memorable?

My grandson. But I painted it when he passed away. It was a painting that was drawn from a photograph. In the photo, my eldest daughter and grandson sit by a window in our home in Madrid. It was a very tender scene and I loved him so much. I think he's my favorite subject, but not from life because he didn't want to sit for me. He always said, "Lola, I have to play."

Who are your favorite artists/ artistic influences?

When people first see my paintings, they are immediately reminded of Turner. Because really, I was so impressed when I visited a museum in London and saw Turner's magnificent paintings. Then, there's Monet. He inspired me to paint water lilies. I had some in the pond in my house in Spain. In a way, everything in painting has been done already. It's nothing new.

Do you have a painting you're most proud of? If so, which one?

Maybe the big orchid painting on the cover of my book. It's from the Nene Quimzon collection. It's the very first big painting that I did. It was originally a commissioned work from Ms. Oledan. She was building a new home and she wanted a huge painting for it. She also invited me to take a look at the space. So I worked on it. But when the painting was finished, the Oledans have left with the





In the photo, my eldest daughter and grandson sit by a window in our home in Madrid. It was a very tender scene and I loved him so much.

- On her favorite subject.

Marcoses and I was left with the painting in the garage of where I lived. It didn't fit in the apartment, the height! When Nene Quimzon came to lunch one day—her husband has just been appointed Philippine Ambassador to the United Kingdom - I said, "I have something here you may like." I showed her the painting and she loved it.

How do you feel about having a grand book of your collected works?

It's a dream I always had. It's good that De La Salle University has given me the opportunity to have such a book. I'm very grateful.

What was the most fun and/or memorable part of working on the book with DLSUPH?

A wonderful moment was when I was told that Rita Ledesma went to Dr. David Jonathan Bayot (DLSU Publishing House Executive Publisher) and he was very enthusiastic about it. That was very important to me. Because David could have said, "No, I don't think so. We don't need that now."

What artist's tool available now do you wish were available back in the day?

Many years ago, when the first home computer was introduced to the world, my daughter bought one. My daughter told me that I should learn how to use it. My grandson said

the same! I told him, "Ian, I don't have time. I have so many paintings to complete!" But he convinced me and said, "Lola, you are not going to lose time. You're going to gain time!" It actually is fantastic.

If I was not a painter or if any reason something happens to my hands and I cannot paint, I hope to keep my eyes in good condition because I will enjoy the internet! I will visit all the museums all over the world! Everything is at your fingertips.

What can you say is your biggest accomplishment as an artist?

This book is a big achievement because it's something I always wanted to have. I think it's important.

What can you say to a young person who wishes to take up painting?

Not to stop painting because if he or she keeps on painting, life is much easier. You feel happy, see life in another way.

Betsy Westendorp's two-volume coffee table book is available through the De La Salle University Publishing House. For inquiries, please email dlsuph@dlsu.edu.ph.



Of exploring arts and countering stagnation together.

The Filipino Artists Association of Sweden

words by
Errah Cavallin | Stockholm

Every association starts with a story – dramatic or not. The Filipino Artists Association of Sweden started out with what then seemed like a far-fetched dream of three individual artists who wanted to have a creative avenue to further their skills.

Helen Svengaard, an established filipino artist in Stockholm, had a brilliant initiative of doing an art exhibit alongside other filipino artists in the area. She initiated a plan to do an art exhibit with two other artists she had heard of but never met – Aya Sunga-Askert and Mary Grace Svensson.

A few exchange of messages over facebook later, the three met for the first time over typical swedish fika. It was one casual afternoon over a warm cup of coffee



that they stumbled upon their common dream of forming an artists association of filipinos that will allow them to challenge their creativity, provide an avenue for showcasing their art pieces, allow a healthy exchange

of ideas, and pave the way for future public exhibits and performances.

Fast forward a couple of months and on the 14th of April 2018, the historic first meeting of FAAS happened at Citykonditoriet in Stockholm.

For the founders – Aya, Grace and Helen - it was overwhelming and unreal to witness their dream in motion.

The chairman Aya Sunga-Askert started the meeting by blurting out the words "Is this even real?"

Today, FAAS proudly brings together veteran and emerging visual, performing, and literary artists with filipino heritage. This includes painters, poets, writers, singers, actresses, photographers, and fashion designers. FAAS can offer assistance as small as helping out with props for personal projects, teaching filipino language to children, translating Pablo Neruda poems from English to Filipino or as big as organizing an art exhibit where pieces are auctioned, art excursions, workshops or fund-raising activities.

The group wants to be an encourager above all else. It wants to form an unbreakable bond between and among artists that will help each of them develop, explore, make bold and well calculated creative decisions.

The group understands that in this day and age, it is easy to get caught up with the daily struggles of life; that creative stagnation or deterioration is a real threat that looms every artist. It is in the simplicity of the association's goals and the rawness of it all that draws talented artists to join the group.

Today, FAAS continues to recruit filipinos or half-filipinos residing in Sweden with a burning passion and talent for the arts to join the association. FAAS believes that there is so much potential to be harnessed by coming together. Arts, after all, is a skill that must constantly be practiced, challenged, and tried. What better way to further one's passion and talent for the arts than to do it with like minded individuals?

To join or know more about FAAS, check out their Facebook page and Instagram account @filipinoartists.sweden.

What better way to further one's passion and talent for the arts than to do it with like minded individuals?

BOOK LAUNCH IN BERN A COLLECTION OF MIGRATION STORIES

words and pictures by
Lily C. Fen | Switzerland

How did you get to Switzerland? The question was asked of several Filipina migrants gathered one Saturday afternoon. Stories of love and loss, of success and sacrifice, spilled out of these women in between gales of laughter, tears, and slices of cassava cake.

After two years of shaping these essays, *Bending without Breaking: 13 Women's Stories of Migration & Resilience* was in print and ready to meet the world. This book captures personal stories that reveal the spirit of hope, survival, and endurance that any reader can find encouraging and empowering.

The book launch took place this 25 November 2017, with nearly 100 visitors in attendance. Volumes of this migration work were flying off the shelves that afternoon.

The open forum at the end of the book reading took on a life of its own: audience members were on fire with questions for the featured authors. The writers remain grateful to proofreader, Cherry Malonzo Marty, graphic and layout designer Sarah Roxas, and editors Monette Bichsel, Lenny Kaye Bugayong, and Lily C. Fen.

This limited edition collection of *Bending without Breaking* was aided by Reformierte Kirchen Berne-Jura-Solothurn, Fastenopfer Philippinen Desk, as well as Karl Mayer Stiftung.

If you are interested in getting a copy of this book, you may find us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/Bending-without-Breaking-SaPil-Book-1497328287050414/>) or send a query or book order to bendingwithoutbreaking@yahoo.com.



STRANGE SPACES

NOTES FROM A
FILIPINA IN PRAGUE

What does it mean to cross an entire ocean and begin a new life?

Wander through the cobblestoned streets of Central Europe in the dead of winter after decades in a land of eternal sunshine, and find out what it means to move to a city where beer is cheaper than water. For anyone who has ever thought about moving someplace else, or ever experienced what it means to be caught

between two cultures, STRANGE SPACES is a relevant read.

STRANGE SPACES is a collection of essays about Prague and Manila: a look into cultural, behavioural, linguistic, and commercial characteristics of two cities from such different continents. It is also a story about losing and finding oneself.

words and pictures by
Lily C. Fen | Switzerland

EXCERPTS FROM THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS OF STRANGE SPACES

I N T R O D U C T I O N

I come from a land of more than 7,000 islands.

I was raised in an archipelago named after a Spanish king.

It is a country that had once spent three hundred years in a convent, and another fifty in Hollywood¹.

That place is called the Philippine Islands, and this is my story. I never would have unearthed this tale, had it not been for an eye-opening four years spent beyond these tropical isles in a tiny, land-locked city called Prague in the Czech Republic.

Deep in the heart of Central Europe, I was to find my voice. This was where I was face-to-face with questions of who I was and where I had come from.

The meat of this book is a collection of essays that aims to juxtapose both the city that had raised me: Manila, and the city in which I would find my voice: Prague. Chronicling a journey from South East Asia to Central Europe, each chapter of this book attempts to set both places side by side by looking into

the littlest things that often can become the biggest things.

This book is not about comparing both cities and then concluding that one is better than the other. Rather, these words are a way of looking at the habits of one place, and finding them humorously strange, if one has come from the opposite side of the globe.

These essays are a way of painting a picture of two vastly different cities in an effort to catch up with the person I left behind in Manila and to look at the person I was becoming in Prague.

Everything I say in this book about Prague and Manila is true.

But also, everything I say here is true particularly *for me*, as I share these tales and misadventures through a subjective lens.

Any other writer might convey these stories differently, depending on where one was born, what languages a person speaks and how the world in which one was raised has shaped that someone's mind.

¹To borrow Nick Joaquin's famous saying about how the Philippines was under Spanish rule for 333 years, and half a century as a protectorate of the United States in the earlier half of the 20th century. The New York Times quotes Philippine National Artist Nick Joaquin as having said "The Philippines spent 300 years trapped in a convent, and 50 years in Hollywood..."

I first encountered the saying during my English language studies in the University of the Philippines. Today, some people refer to this saying as an old adage or cliché. Whatever the case may be, it certainly is a colourful and succinct way of summing up what is truly Filipino today.

Let us just say that by the time my first October in Prague had come and gone, autumn was about to surrender to a cold and depressing four months. Winter was about to envelop the entire city in a blanket of frost and bleak skies.

That was when I began to write.

I was writing my way back home, bringing to life vibrant memories and putting them

on the page for others to see. These are the snapshots of a life placed here to be viewed by others. The hope is that my words will bring together two worlds that are geographically and culturally distant from one another; that they might actually come together in an explosion of realizations. In any case, maybe the anecdotes of peoples' peculiar habits in both Prague and Manila will at least be worth a good laugh.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Balikbayan is the noun for *expatriate* in my native tongue, Tagalog².

If one were to dissect this word, one would find that it is made up of two parts: the word *balik*, which means "to return," and *bayan*, which means "nation." Deriving meaning from these two words reveals that the compound form refers to "one who is *returning* to his nation." The word focuses on the act of *returning home*.

The word *expatriate*, on the other hand, can be defined as a way "to leave one's original country to stay someplace else."

Based on that definition, the word *expatriate* in English is a word that focuses on *what was left behind*. The word looks to the act of *leaving* to go someplace else, as if where one has come from has been, or needs to be, forgotten.

Why is it that in the English language, the

word focuses on what was left behind, the act of leaving to go somewhere else, as if where we come from has been obliterated from memory?

Now that I have broached the subject, images of large brown boxes full of *padala* (objects sent home from abroad to the place of origin) enter my imagination. This is the *balikbayan box* that a Filipino overseas loves to fill to the brim with clothing, toys and other material goods that he can send back home to relatives. It is his or her way of sending love to an *inaanak* (godchild) or an *apo* (grandchild). Clothes that smell of newness and hope for a better life arrive all the way from a relative who resides stateside, entering the archipelago, sealed in this precious cargo of gifts.

What else does an expatriate send, apart from tokens of love? What occupies a migrant's mind? Is this person in a state of flux?

Can he or she manage to stay constant throughout continents? How much of a new city changes this person over time? Can a migrant ever *really* "come home?"

Moving to Central Europe meant that I was becoming a Euro-Filipino. I found that this transformation meant that I was living between two worlds, often caught in a clash of cultures, and always trying to reconcile both in my mind and heart.

The great divide would lead me to encounter challenges: a harsher climate, a people so reserved that they needed serious sessions of beer-chugging to let loose, dealing with a new concept of birthdays not being a huge holiday in certain parts of the world, and other things in between.

The notion of "language" was often fraught, and the idea of a "language barrier" really made itself known to me in a country that barely spoke English. The challenge of having to learn the more-difficult-to-quantify body language, and the language of what is left unsaid were additional lessons on this crash course on cultural exchange.

People often talk about this idea of "east meeting west," but where can that really and truly occur? I would say that the place where these two can actually converge is in the heart of the *balikbayan*, viewed through his or her stories and experiences.

For the sojourner, there is the task of remembering where one has come from by recalling one's identity. Where does a sense of self come from? Does it have to do with the

food he eats, the language he speaks, who he spends time with, what movies he watches, what books he reads?

Becoming a *balikbayan* meant learning to make something completely different *home*. How does one manage to achieve that?

The Far East is a region characterized by stringent social rules: family is everything, blood is thicker than water, nearly everyone has a God, goes to church, respects elders without question. Silence is still considered a virtue in these places. Communities believe in the notion of saving face, of *pakikisama* (a collective need to get along with each other), or *utang na loob* (a social or moral debt to another).

There are so many things a sojourner has to learn. And eventually, these stories have to be told. The migrant comes home to the Philippines excitedly bombarding relatives and old friends with recollections he or she has experienced of a new world.

Once a long-term traveller steps back into the Philippines for a visit after a long time away from the land that had birthed him or her, those years away from the islands has already altered that individual a shade different from the one who had left.

A Filipino expatriate cannot help but spew out one story after another about "how it is abroad," something often misconstrued as *pagyayabang* (bragging). But in his or her heart, these stories form the cry of the expatriate who now lives, both in the mental and physical spaces people occupy, between two worlds.

² Linguists from the University of the Philippines define "Filipino" as one of the two officially recognized national languages in the country, whose main base is Tagalog, with many borrowed terms from English and Spanish.

Sometimes it is difficult to merge both, and glaring disparities become highlighted during visits to one's point of origin. The result is being in a constant state of reconciling variations and celebrating similarities experienced in both landscapes.

These are the reasons why I have put together this book: to set the east and west side by

IN A CONSTANT STATE OF GRAY

Smiles were the first thing I missed when I began a new life as an expatriate.

Having come from eternally sunny Philippines, I found myself looking back for scenes bathed in yellow, for high humidity, for heat, for laughter.

Manila was a place of constant sound, with cars tooting, and tricycle engines sputtering at all hours of the day and night.

Cars raced through highways well into the wee hours of the morning and the sound of jokes and light banter pervaded the crowded capital. Peddlers sold roasted peanuts on the corner of Pasong Tamo and Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA for short), shouting hopefully at passersby "*Maniiii!*" in their sweaty white T-shirts and rolled up denim jeans. Commuters stopped to buy small brown packets of the salty treats, jingling a few coins for payment into the vendor's hands, taking their share and hurrying off to work or home, depending on the time of day.

side in order to learn about new perspectives. It might then be possible to scrutinize the contrasting characteristics with a magnifying glass, all in an attempt to understand each other better.

The question we ask ourselves is: once a migrant submerges himself in a new place, what parts of the original identity are lost?

Manila: a place where I always drove a car from point A to point B, where security guards opened doors for me, politely and demurely saying, "Hello, Ma'am/Sir."

It was a place where people apologized if they bumped into me by accident on a crowded sidewalk or shopping mall corridor, where waitresses gently deferred to me and were quick to give me what I wanted.

Everyone smiled in Manila.

My first ninety days in Prague, Czech Republic, where my Czech husband and I had decided to move, was quite the opposite kind of world. Smiles had been replaced by an astounding number of frowns.

It was cold, and there was no sun half of the year.

I often enjoyed describing it to my *kuyas*² as a place that looked like *The Matrix*. Remember that scene where Laurence Fishburne's

character described humans as having placed constant clouds up in the skies to keep the horizon murky, preventing the robots from recharging their power reserves by way of solar energy?

It was the same in Prague for half the year – we were in a constant state of gray, where not one ray of sunshine pierced through the clouds.

My husband and I lived on the outskirts of Prague.

It meant that I was the only Asian on the bus, once I got off at the end station of the Metro (subterranean train system) line.

I was stared at countless times.

It reminded me of how little children in the Philippines were often astounded by someone who walked into a school with blond hair. Unbridled excitement and attention would follow, all eyes on that which was unknown and unique.

"Woah! She has yellow hair?" and a gaggle of children would surround the little one, touching her mane.

Jaws drop and curiosity sets in when people encounter something completely different.

I often felt this similar sensation upon moving to Europe.

"Oh my! There is an Asian on the bus!" was the kind of reaction from this very homogenous part of the Czech capital that greeted me as I

left the city centre of Prague.

Both the Philippines and the Czech Republic have this in common: they are two nations that have a history of falling under foreign rule.

One is an archipelago of 7,107 islands (during low-tide) in South East Asia, with a burgeoning population of about 98 million (as of this writing), and a land area of 300,000 square kilometres.

The other is a tiny, land-locked nation right smack in the middle of Central Europe, with a population of approximately 10 million, and a land area that can be rounded off to 79,000 square kilometres.

Behavioural habits were one of the starkest differences I noted (and immediately experienced) upon moving to Central Europe.

My years in Prague displayed to me one basic fact: Czech people in general are a frowning people.

They love to frown.

It must be the cold.

If one so much as met their eye or tried to smile at them while on board a bus, tram, or the Metro—one would get back a scowl.

Words are not enough to do the experience justice.

It is a punishing, miserable look that stares right through a person.

² Kuya (older brother) and kababayan (fellow citizen) are the singular forms in Tagalog, while its plural forms are mga kuya and mga kababayan. By adding the "-s" to these words, I was utilizing the Filipino lexicon, while borrowing grammar particles from the English language to pluralize them. Talk about a hybrid language, often made manifest in many a conversation in Manila.

Or, if looks could kill, then that glare I just got was like a sharp sword slicing through my heart.

I do not mean to judge.

I only state my experience.

I have to admit, coming from a land of smiles, this was one of the most difficult differences to deal with.

I took it completely for granted that Filipinos were a smiling people.

My *kababayans* (fellow countrymen) laugh and joke about everything.

It must be the sunshine.

Throw anything their way, and grinning and chortling will be the result.

“Oh there’s a huge flood that ransacked the whole village and now I have no home,” and any *manong* (meaning “elder brother” in Visayan, the word used liberally by *Manileños* to mean someone older, usually referring to a male blue-collar worker) breaks into chuckles. “Well, thank God we are alive, and have something to eat. And now we need to build our home again from scratch. Literally.” Laughter and wide grins characterize lines like these.

Say, a gentleman working at an office space has to utter “What? Oh, there’s a flood that destroyed my car on Pasay Road?” He raises his hands in frustration, while others take funny shots of his vehicle that has, indeed, been inundated by dirty rainwater.

Wicked jokes then ensue as the next *manong* who happens to be the doorman of an “entertainment club” right across from our hero’s office gingerly carries the petite “Guest Relations Officer” to dry safety over the flooded entrance adorning the way to her workplace.

I never realized how much Filipinos smiled until I was faced with the absence of it.

I had never experienced how much a people could frown until I moved to Prague in the middle of winter.

But I will give Czechs this – once the sun started coming out in spring, and then in summer, they started slowly, shyly, almost reluctantly, to return my smiles.

It then does seem safe to say that it is the sunshine that brings out the joy in a people. A bitter winter can kill that on the opposite side of the globe and quell that in human beings until it is reawakened by spring.

I took it completely for granted that Filipinos were a smiling people.

I have come across several expat essays in English about how to make it in European cities such as Prague, but they have all revolved around Western perspectives.

I hope that having a voice from the Far East for expats who are from regions similar to where I am from will be helpful, exciting, and educational.

And for my Western readers: I hope for them an awakening, a curiosity, even desire, to know what it is like to borrow a different point of view and see the world from another person’s eyes, just for a moment.

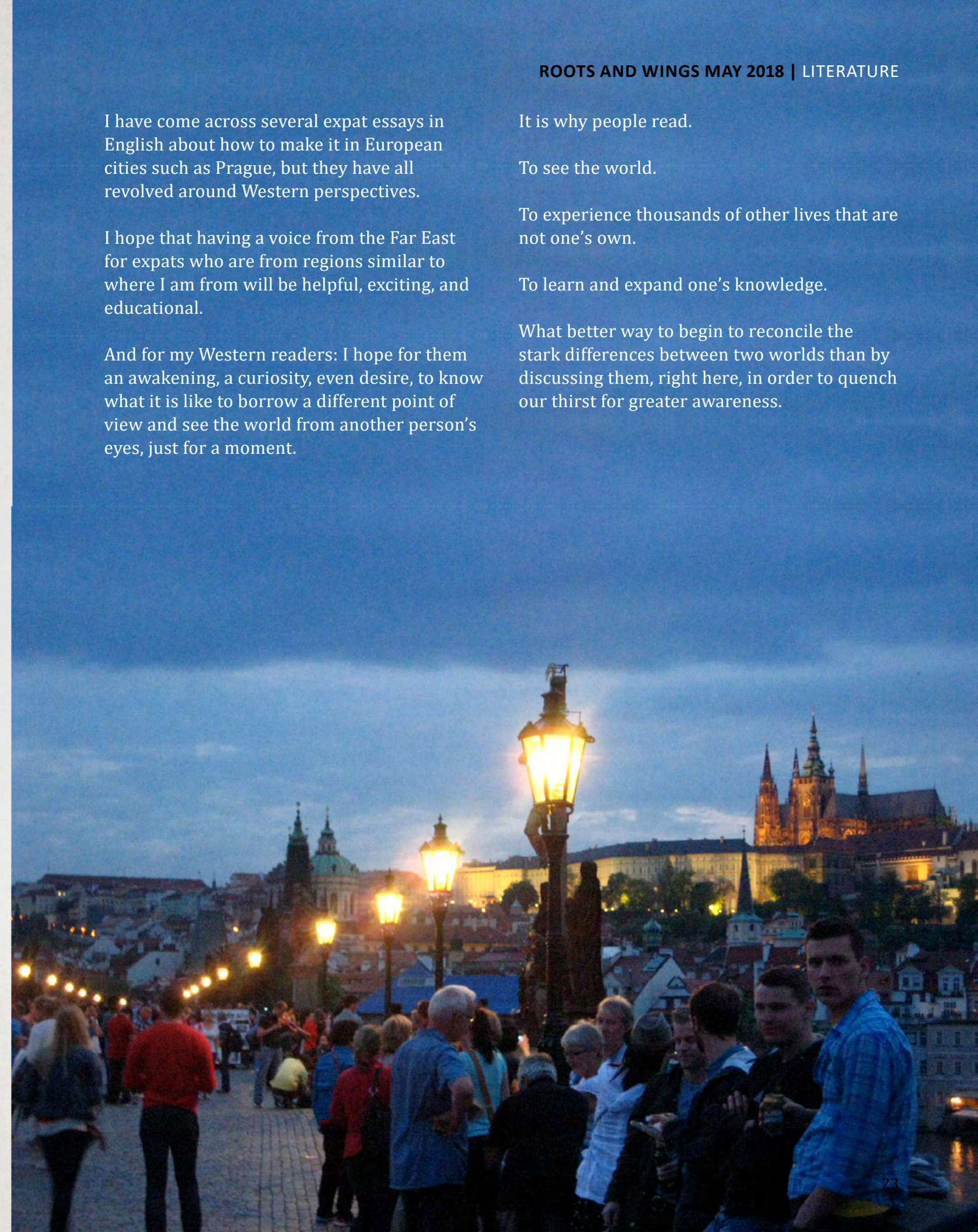
It is why people read.

To see the world.

To experience thousands of other lives that are not one’s own.

To learn and expand one’s knowledge.

What better way to begin to reconcile the stark differences between two worlds than by discussing them, right here, in order to quench our thirst for greater awareness.





BACK TO THE ROOTS

SURFIT IN SIARGAO WITH CARL HANSEN

words by
Michelle Marquez | ENFiD News + Views

Did you know that out of the 7,600+ islands in the Philippines only 2,000 are inhabited? My goal is to visit half of them especially the remote ones. Some of these islands are inhabited by entrepreneurial Euro-Pinoys, a German – Filipino in Palawan, French – Filipino family in Mindoro and Scandinavian-Filipinos living in the island of Malapascua. I've often wondered what made them give up their comfortable and convenient lifestyle to live in an island. I've thought of doing the same but never had the courage.

I have admiration for those who took the road less travelled and this made me interview Carl Hansen. He is the son of publisher Rachel

Hansen of Enfid Sweden and the owner of SurFit Gym in the island of Siargao, Surigao del Norte. The whole province of Surigao has just the right amount of infrastructure for comfortable living that enables the people to maintain the atmosphere and experience of island life. It is an ideal getaway and a good choice for young entrepreneur like Carl. We've exchanged couple of message through social media and he amiably agreed to answer some of my questions.

MM: Tell us about your place and SurFit Gym.

CH: I live in Siargao island, about three hours away by boat from Surigao Del Norte and

SurFit is a fitness gym. Siargao has one of the best surfspots in the world called Cloud 9, so that's how the island became famous. Opening a fitness gym on a surfing island the name SurFit with its muscle wave logo works really well. SurFit is a 110 sqm fitness gym that combines a relatively modern gym in a big native style nipa structure.

MM: Where did you live before?

CH: I lived in Sweden back in 2013, before I started backpacking in Asia. I ended up living in China for the first 7 months in a Kung Fu School. After that I began traveling around to different places like Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and I didn't settle down anywhere else until I got to Siargao in August 2016.

MM: What made you decide to move to Siargao?

CH: I decided to move to Siargao because I kept coming back here and always ended up extending my stay. I came here the first time in 2012 and I just fell in love with the island; it's people, the way of living and everything else that comes with island life. Coming back here for the 4th time in 2016 with no plan of how long I'm staying or where I'm going next, the idea of opening a gym came up and before I knew it, all the bits and pieces came together and few months later Siargao's first gym SurFit opened.

MM: What were your initial concerns/issues when you moved in Siargao?

CH: When I decided to move here, I didn't really have any concerns personally, being half Filipino and all makes things easier to stay here long term with less hassle. When it came to Business I had more concerns and problems than I can count, starting a business in a country and a place where you have no idea how things work and, where

you can't do the easy way like finding all your answers online. Everything had to be done by having connections, phone calls and things being dealt with personally. Living on an island required multiple trips to the mainland Surigao for government permits, paperwork and supplies, not to even mention how I was going to get two tons of equipment to the island in the middle of nowhere, making logistics a nightmare. But I had help from my mother and friends and after months of work and preparation everything paid off.

MM: Why Surfit? Did you have any experience in this business before?

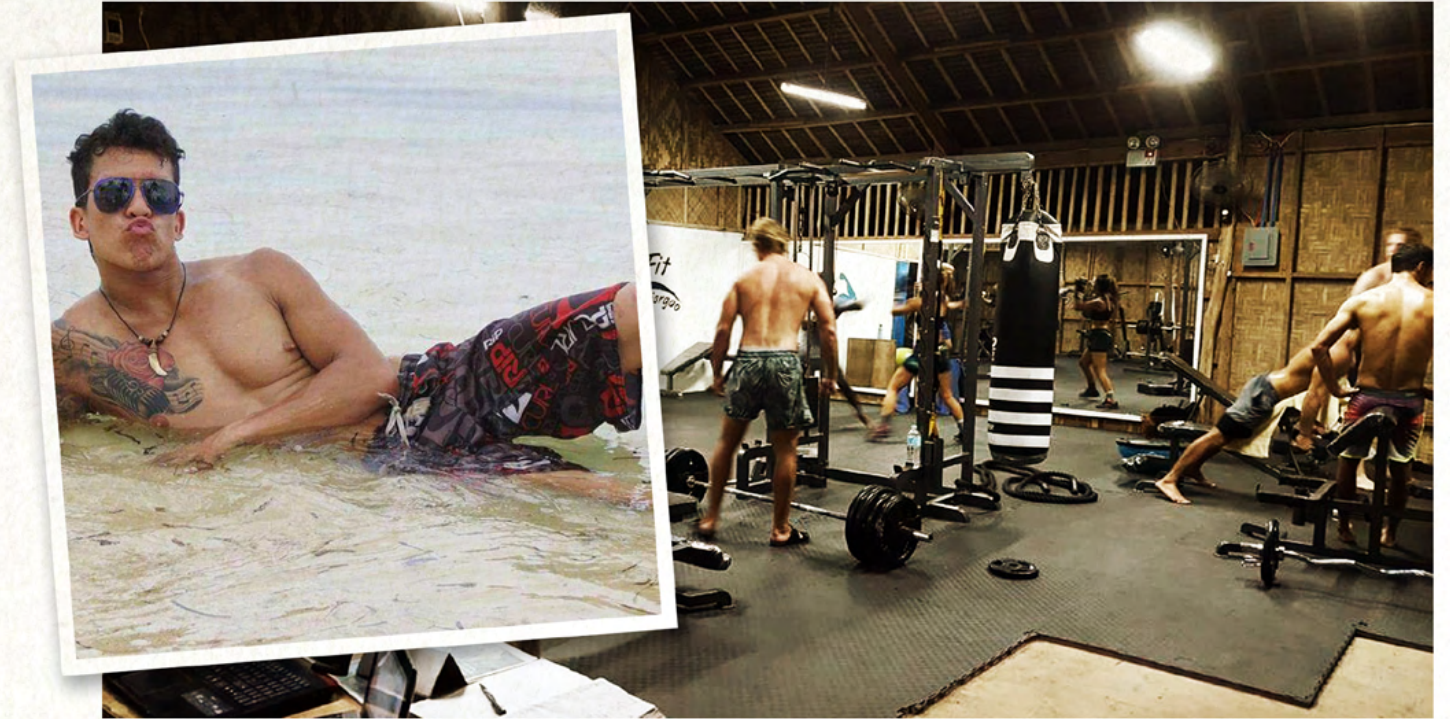
CH: I started the SurFit Gym because I saw an opportunity of an island growing with people/tourists every year and there not being any public gym whatsoever on the Island. I've had years of gym experience and used to go to workout 5 times a week when I lived at home before I started traveling and I've always wanted my own gym, so it was a natural choice and decision.

MM: What do you enjoy best about your way of life?

CH: The things I enjoy the best about my life is everything haha. I live on a beautiful paradise island with the woman I love, running my own business in a place that I love, where everyone is friendly, freshly caught seafood (fish, shrimp, squid and shells) is easily accessible and cheap and not to even mention the enjoyment of surfing.

MM: What have been the best and worst experience?

CH: My worst experience on the Island happened recently, I was taking a boat early in the morning to go to Surigao and was driving my motorbike when it was still dark, and there was a black Carabao walking around untied on the road that I didn't see until it was right in



front of me, so I crashed. I was pretty hurt and bleeding from my forehead when a van driver came along and saw me and picked me up. One of the bad things with the island is that there is no proper hospital here. I was taken to the city where they gave me stitches and painkillers but I had to take the boat for three hours to the mainland for further medical checks. Luckily I am alright.

The worst/best experience at the same time involves things like setting up the business, weeks of stress and hard work. And, sometimes even during surfing, paddling for hours against currents getting smashed by waves over and over again... But putting all that time and hard work into something whether it is opening your business and seeing it grow and finally catching your perfect wave is an incredibly satisfying and rewarding feeling that makes you feel so alive and it teaches you to never give up.

MM: How do you get covered by healthcare?

CH: I got my own extended insurance that covers my healthcare here in case something bad would happen.

MM: Will you go back to your life before?

CH: I don't see myself going back to the life I had in Sweden anytime soon or ever haha. As much as I occasionally miss a modern lifestyle with modern homes and proper wifi I'm a lot happier here.

MM: What would you advise those who want to follow your way?

CH: For those who want to follow my way, I say before you do something be sure it's something you really want to do so you can stay committed and dedicated, be smart and decisive. But at the same time don't overthink it, overthinking all the problems and work of something you want to do can easily scare you away from the thought. If you're somewhere you love and it's something you really want to do your commitment and dedication will help you push thru any problems that might occur.

For those who want to contact Carl, you can contact him at <https://www.facebook.com/SurFitGymSiargao/>

Please find more photos and information about Siargao, Surigao del Norte at <https://www.facebook.com/Siargaolands/>



Vice President Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo
London School of Economics, London, the United Kingdom
 06 April 2018

MUSINGS

*on Vice President
 Leni Robredo’s Speech
 on “Overcoming Poverty
 and the Role of Politics
 in Economic Growth”*

words by
Atty. Aimee Alado | London

“The best hope for peace in the world lies in the simple but far reaching recognition that we all have many different associations and affiliations, and we need not see ourselves as being rigidly divided by a single categorisation of hardened groups, which confront each other.”

These were the closing words of Vice President (VP) Leni Robredo, quoting Amartya Sen, an Indian economist awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his contributions to welfare economics and social choice theory and in acknowledgment of his work in the problems of the poorest members of society.

VP Leni was invited by LSE’s international development society (DESTIN), LSE Department of International Development, Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre and spoke before an elite group of LSE students and staff on the above topic. The LSE talk was the first stop out of the

two engagements that the VP and her Philippine Delegation were invited to participate in Europe this April.

The second engagement in Berlin was hosted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) where FNF provided a forum for discussions between the VP and her delegation, the German government and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) to dialogue and learn from experiences of officials and key figures to find sustainable solutions to poverty elimination and social justice.

At the LSE talk in London, I was lucky to get an invite and fortunate enough to have listened on a topic that VP Leni has been advocating since her lawyer days. This is only the second time that I have listened to and have met her since being elected as the 14th Vice President of the Republic of the Philippines in 2016. But it seems that I have known her for a life time! I guess this is the feeling

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you get when you can relate to an advocacy of a person who is true and genuine in her desire to help those who are on the sidelines of society (“nasa laylayan ng lipunan”).

VP Leni may be considered as an “accidental politician” or some might say it was by divine intervention depending on your inclination. She was a Human Rights (HR) lawyer and a social activist before she was thrust into political life.

Her late husband, Jesse Robredo, a former statesman, who was then the Secretary of the Interior and Local Government died in a plane crash in August 2012. His sudden death came at the eve of a general election in May 2013 where Jesse was supposed to stand as a congressman in Camarines Sur’s 3rd district.

In his stead, VP Leni acquiesced to stand in lieu providing a bridge to continue the legacy of good governance of her late husband. She thought that three years of her term as a congress woman (from 2013 to 2016) would be enough. But in 2016 she decided to continue her public service and stood as the running mate and vice president for the presidential candidate Manuel Roxas III (Mar). Mar lost to President Rodrigo Duterte and VP Leni won the vice-presidency by a narrow margin.

Politics, if used correctly, is an effective tool to create policies for the benefit of society as a whole. Though it is often a challenging balancing act to effect what’s good for the majority but at the same time to enact laws that would help the marginalised sector to be socially mobile.

If we are to examine the Philippines’ boom and bust (and concurrent boom) cycle in the last 30 plus years, it is an economic miracle story and the story of perseverance and resilience from the third most happiest people in the world (according to

US-based firm Gallup International).

The Philippines is a country that is visited by at least 20 plus typhoons every year and other natural disasters, being geographically located at the southern portion of the Pacific “Ring of Fire”. At the Filipino’ finest hours in 1986, they booted out in a bloodless people power revolution a dictator who has governed the country for more than two decades.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution (1987 Constitution) was drafted by the specially constituted Constitutional Commission and was ratified by the Filipino people in a nationwide plebiscite on the 2nd of February 1987. The 1987 Constitution was the Magna Carta / The Great Charter or the Supreme Law of the land. It serves as a tool to rebuild democracy that would essentially safeguard and avoid a repeat of the country’s ‘darkest history’ in the last 50 years.

Since then, bureaucracy were streamlined, public institutions were strengthened, the balance of power amongst the three branches (the executive, legislative and the judiciary) were delineated and kept in check and devolution of power to improve local governance were amongst the measures implemented.

The Philippine economy were liberalised, opening up its economy to foreign investments. Law and order were restored and the fight against corruption continues making it easier to do business in the country thereby gaining the confidence of global investors. All these measures were factors to the positive economic growth that the Philippines has endured for 76 consecutive quarters (19 years).

The Philippines’ gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average of 5.2% from 1999 to 2010. Momentum picked up in 2010 when Philippine

GDP peaked at 7.7% whilst the global GDP was at 4.3%. From 2010 to 2016 Philippine GDP averaged at 6.3% indicating an upward trajectory that economists hope would bring in economic transformation that would lift all boats not just those of the rich. And in 2017 Philippine GDP grew at 6.7%, the third highest in the region next to China and Vietnam but lower than the 7% level that economists had initially forecasted.

The Philippine economic transformation has caught the attention of the world, no longer considered as the “Sick Man of Asia.” In 2013, Fitch Ratings upgraded the Philippines’ sovereign funds to the coveted investment grade rating for the first time in the country’s history. Several upgrades have successively followed given again by Fitch Ratings, Standard & Poors, Moody’s and Japan Credit Rating Agency enjoining the Philippines to the ranks of A-lister countries.

Financial institutions like HSBC forecasts the Philippines to become the world’s 16th largest economy by 2050 mainly due to demographics and rising educational standards. The country has one of the youngest median age in the world at 23 years and is in the demographic window about to reap the demographic dividends where at least half of its population is at their most productive age.

However, the grim reality behind the Philippines’ successful economic growth is an ugly contrast. Philippines has still one of the highest incidence of poverty among the Southeast Asian (SEA) countries. Although the poverty incidence has gone down from 44.2% of total population in 1980 to 21.6% in 2015, this still translates to 21.9 million Filipinos who live below the poverty line.

The rate at which Philippine poverty statistics has gone down is not as fast as with other SEA countries. Malaysia has brought down the number

of its people below the poverty line to 0.6%; Vietnam to 7%; Thailand to 10.5%; Indonesia to 10.9% and Cambodia to 14%. Only Lao at 23.2% and Myanmar at 25.6% have poverty incidence level higher than the Philippines.

A study by Philip Gerson, an economist of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was cited by VP Leni as attributing to factors that has extremely retarded the progress of poverty reduction.

One factor is the past economic policies that were discriminating against agriculture and discouraging investment in human capital. The Philippines is mainly dependent on farming which is the most underdeveloped sector. Its farmers and their families were also the poorest in the country.

There were not enough spend on public education as well as health and nutrition that should have been a wise investment on its human capital of around 100 million plus people. The Philippines is the 12th most populous country in the world.

However, the study gave credit to certain policy reforms in recent decades by different government administrations that has helped in the reduction of poverty.

Amongst the examples, the costs of shipping and other transportation in an archipelagic country like the Philippines has dramatically climbed down. The (Gloria Macapagal) Arroyo administration has lowered the shipping costs by 30% to 40% due to the “Roll On Roll Off” (RoRo) initiative making it easier and cheaper for people and goods to travel from one island to the next by the use of boats, barges and a network of ports.

This was further entrenched when Competition law and the (new) Cabotage law were signed by then President Benigno Aquino III (PNoy). It

opened up competition not just in the shipping industry but also in land and air transportation. This has paved the way to the development and modernisation of the fleets, ports and airports and has dramatically reduced the costs of goods and travel.

The Arroyo administration has also initiated the Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program (PPPP) that was further expanded by the PNoy administration to cover 4.6 million poor households. It is a conditional cash transfer initiative where a poor household can receive up to P1,300 cash a month on the condition that pregnant mothers get check-ups and primary school age children attend school.

Other programs such as KALAHY-CIDSS program was initialled and funded in 2003 by the government’s Department of Social Welfare & Development (DSWD), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank.

The KALAHY-CIDSS program is s a sustainable livelihood program and a community based approach to delivering social services. Its development objective is the “empowerment of local communities through their involvement in the design and implementation of poverty reduction projects and improved participation in local governance.”

Another factor cited by the Gerson study as one of the reasons of the slow reduction of poverty incidence in the Philippines is the uneven distribution of growth resulting to an alarming inequality. In the early 1990s, the richest 20% of Philippine society earned 52% of the country’s total income almost 11 times the share of the poorest 20%.

Experts point to politics as an underlying reason. And Gerson study says the restrictive policies

that have failed to stimulate growth owes much to the important role played by the elites in the Philippine politics and society.

This conclusion was affirmed by a research of Ronald Mendoza where it examined the political dynasties in the Philippines and their impact on economic growth. Just look at the “fat dynasty” (defined as having more than two family members occupying positions in the government) figures in the following:

- 66 governors out of 81
- 231 congressmen out of 290
- 1,127 mayors out of 1,634
- 930 vice mayors out of 1,634.

The most dynastic provinces have remained so from 2004 to 2016 and new dynasties have begun to dominate additional provinces. Ten provinces with the highest dynastic shares in 2016 elections consistently ranked in the top 20 poorest provinces since 2004. These are: Maguindanao, Sulu, Lanao Del Sur, Batangas, Rizal, Pampanga, Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, Pangasinan and Ilocos Norte.

Numerous researches by the ADB, the Asian Institute of Management (AIM), the Ateneo School of Government and the UP Economist to name a few all point to the same conclusion. The correlation between political dynasties and the poorest and most underdeveloped region in the Philippines is quite telling.

Long before her life in politics, VP Leni has dedicated her service as a HR lawyer to the most vulnerable sectors in Philippine society. She has worked tirelessly and conscientiously in promoting the interests of the farmers, fishermen, women, children and indigenous people.

When VP Leni has first assumed office as a Congresswoman in 2013, she was committed

In 2013, Fitch Ratings upgraded the Philippines’ sovereign funds to the coveted investment grade rating for the first time in the country’s history.

“Poverty is the root cause of many Filipino families’ suffering. Poverty is a larger war that needs our focus and attention.”

in supporting policies which is pro-poor, anti-poverty and founded on good governance.

In 2016, when she assumed office as vice-president, she made good in her campaign promise to do MORE for the poor. She set to task in creating a program that has streamlined the government agencies and pulling all the resources from the private sector and civil society organisations (CSO).

The currency that she uses is ‘trust’! Her highly successful “Angat Buhay” (uplifting lives) Flagship Program were able to pull these resources together under the limited resources of the office of the Vice-President (OVP).

Under the 1987 Constitution, the OVP only

performs ceremonial duties. It has very limited mandate and resources as it is considered really as an office in waiting just in case the office of the President is vacated for whatever reason during the six year term. To use VP Leni’s words she humorously referred to it as a “spare tire”.

Speaking before the over a thousand representatives of her partner agencies at the Partnerships Against Poverty Summit in October 2016, she was quoted: “Poverty is the root cause of many Filipino families’ suffering. Poverty is a larger war that needs our focus and attention.”

Through “Angat Buhay,” the OVP has top five priorities:

1. Food Security & Nutrition;
2. Education;
3. Universal Health Care;
4. Rural Development; and
5. Women Empowerment.

Since the launch of “Angat Buhay” it has benefited 99,198 families in 176 municipalities/areas across the country. It provided P182 million worth of services to poor communities in the Philippines broken down as follows:

- P8.6 million for feeding and nutrition programs which benefited 2,451 stunted and wasted children and lactating mothers; 3,354 indigent families were provided with assistive devices and free health services;
- P41.75 million worth of assets and livelihood opportunities for about 8,000 farmers, fisher folks and indigent families;
- P3.41 million worth of resources including solar kits and generators, water filters and water pumps benefiting almost 2,000 individuals;
- P6.85 million for scholarships, classrooms; teachers’ trainings and other support for

the education of 22,991 students and out of school youth among others.

Amongst the specific municipalities VP Leni has mentioned before the LSE audience were:

- Agutaya in Northern Palawan. It can only be reached by 10-12 hours boat ride from Coron, Palawan. Despite its proximity to the five star resort island called Amanpulo by Aman Resorts, the people are in extreme poverty. There is no electricity, there is very little source of potable water and the only school that has been ravaged by typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda four years ago has never been rebuilt.

The public infrastructure is nothing as there are no roads. Limited farming and fishing are the only source of livelihood and due to the remoteness of the island it has almost nil access to government basic welfare services perhaps the reason why quite a number of children were stunted. Stunting is a condition that is irreversible after the age of five and it affects the physical and mental development of a child.

The team of ‘Angat Buhay’ has returned several times in Agutaya and through their following partners:

- › ASA Philippines - installed 120 solar panels to households in Barangay Diit;
- › Team Energy - installed 149 solar panels in two barangays: Marakanyaw and Matarawis lighting up around 400 households in the area;
- › Andres Soriano Foundation - started regular health caravans, livelihood trainings and water testing so that a water system level 2 was immediately put up;
- › St Theresa’s Alumni Association - donated

motorised boats for the fishermen;

- › Children’s Hour & Canvass Philippines - donated books and school kits;
- › Philippine Toy Library - set up toy library

- Siayan, Zamboanga Del Norte. Poverty incidence in 2009 is 97.5%. The people could hardly eat a meal a day. ‘Angat Buhay’ partnered with Hapag Asa for an ongoing feeding program for more than 800 children.

In Feb 2018, ‘Angat Buhay’ inaugurated a dormitory for boys called the Yellow Dorm of Hope at the Siayan National High School courtesy of Yellow Boat of Hope Foundation, an NGO initially organised to help students from coastal communities.

There were 25 boys from grades 7 to 10 occupying the dormitory for free. All of these boys come from poor families and live at least 6 to 10 kms away from school. Everyone has a common story of hardships, getting up very early, traversing rivers, travelling at least 2 hours each way; arriving late at night and too tired to do any school work.

Some of them became bread earners at an early age supporting sick parents and feeding the rest of the family. The heart breaking stories of each of these boys are only a fraction of the struggles that poor students in the Philippines face routinely.

The hard working mayor of Siayan, Flora Villaroza and her team has been doing a lot to help these students but despite the drop out rate is still very high. Thus, the dormitory built in Siayan could be a life changing opportunity for the young people and their families.

No part of the figures and projects mentioned above came from the government. Everything

came from the generosity and support of private partners and civil society organisations.

The programs might seem modest as it is just a drop in the ocean of poverty in our country but in the words of VP Leni, "It provides great help in eradicating poverty in the most challenging corners of the Philippines. It proves that thru collaboration not through division we can solve our country's poverty problems building bridges of understanding rather than walls of anger. It is the world's answer to today's challenges contrary to global narratives where people prefer to retreat inwards rather than reach outwards. Where division, hate and anger are the norms instead of collaboration. Where civility and empathy are trampled down by differences in political colour and ideologies, religion, gender and economic class."

From the initially identified farthest and poorest 50 municipalities, the OVP has extended help so far to 176 municipalities. These municipalities were fortunate to have a progressive, transparent and accountable government local chief executives who are able to embrace the program and ensure its sustainability. Working inclusively with the local community, it empowered the local people to give them the tools to solve their own

problems.

These communities were also fortunate to have the OVP acting as a conduit between towns needing help and organisations wanting to help. And the OVP could not be so fortunate enough to have VP Leni at its helm who made it her life mission to help those in the fringes of society.

To quote her once again at the LSE presentation, "Eradicating poverty is a huge entrenched role but not impossible to solve if you look at it one person one community one problem at a time. Each poverty statistics represent one smiling face, an overworked pair of hands, a child clutching her teacher's hand, a dream. When we make a difference for one of them, we change a life."

Simple but quite moving and powerful words. And quite analogous to this piece of wisdom: "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!" Despite all her personal and professional challenges, despite all the odds in the current political situation, her work ethos taught her that you cannot be constrained by the limitations that have been thrown your way. Look for innovative things, creative solutions and be the game changer always.

"Eradicating poverty is a huge entrenched role but not impossible to solve if you look at it one person one community one problem at a time."



Aimee Alado

About the Author

Innovation (JIPII). Her thesis, **"A Comparative Study of the Philippines and Japan Intellectual Property Laws,"** has been published by the JPO.

Aimee was one of the speakers at the inaugural launch of the "Strategic Forum on Women, Business and Economic Development" at the 5th Southeast Asian (SEA) Studies Symposium in April 2016. It was organised by Project Southeast Asia at the University of Oxford. She has also been a speaker on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) various forums.

Aimee has been the chairman and legal counsel for the European Network of Filipino Diaspora (ENFID) Europe and UK and other non-profit and charitable organisations. Her brainchild and family's Work Environment & Lifelong Learning (WELL) Trust has been a CSO invitee at the European Bank for Reconstruction & Development's (EBRD) annual general meeting and conference for the last two years (2017 and 2018). She was the first UK awardee of FWN's "100 Most Influential Filipina Women in the World" in 2015.

Aimee's recent appointments are: Chairman, ASEAN UK Business Forum (AUBF); Committee Member of Government Legal Department - Gender & Equality Network (GLD-GEN); Legal Advisor, Filipino Arts Culture Education & Sports (FACES) Foundation.

Aimee Alado is an attorney-at-law who has more than fifteen years of post qualification experience having qualified in the Philippines in 1999. She successfully gained a Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) and Legal Practice Course (LPC) in 2008 at BPP Law School in London. She has multi-jurisdictional knowledge and experience and has worked in private, government and civil society organisations (CSO) in various jurisdictions.

Aimee has worked at the Department of Trade & Industry, Court of Appeals and a private commercial law firm in the Philippines. While in the UK she has spent 10 years in the civil service working at the Ministry of Justice and the Government Legal Department (GLD).

Aimee was a recipient of the Intellectual Property (IP) Fellowship under the auspices of Japan Patent Office (JPO) and World Intellectual Property Office (WIPO). She did her training and research at the Asia Pacific Intellectual Property Centre and Japan Institute for Promoting Invention and

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