

Village Immersion: an Approach in Reorienting Career Civil Servants

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In order to produce government executives and career administrators who will carry out the development tasks of the New Republic, the Career Executive Service Development Program adopted the Village Immersion concept. The idea is geared towards making the program participants realize the real conditions of the majority of the Filipinos by being one of them for a duration of time. This first-hand experience with the people is hoped to breed government administrators with developed commitment to help achieve national development not only through generating increased income but also through sharing the development resources equitably to the disadvantaged population whose potential capabilities for helping themselves have been recognized.

The Career Executive Service Development Program

The Career Executive Service Development Program (CESDP) is the management education program drawn up by the Development Academy of the Philippines to support the Career Executive Service (CES). The "Career Executive Service" is formally defined as "the third and highest level of the Civil Service which embraces officers assigned to the positions of deputy minister, assistant secretary, bureau director, assistant bureau director, regional director, assistant regional director, and all other positions of equivalent rank."¹

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¹ Office of Special Services, "The Career Executive Service Development Program," (Makati, Rizal: Development Academy of the Philippines, no date), p. 4.

The CES, created in 1973 as part of the New Society's Integrated Reorganization Plan, seeks to modify the position concept in the career service. In the CES, the status and salaries of the career executives are based on their rank and not on the position they occupy at any given time. The rank classification is an innovation that allows for mobility or flexibility of assignments such that the government could utilize the services or special talents of career executives wherever they are most needed or will likely create the greatest impact. This feature is especially relevant in a developing country which cannot afford to have its scarce executive manpower pegged to positions.

Membership in the CES is achieved primarily by successfully undergoing the CESDP, and then being appointed by the President of the Philippines to a rank in the CES.

Between the first CESDP which opened on 22 April 1974 and the 16th session which formally closed in July 1982, the CESDP has produced 800 career Executive Service eligibles sharing a common vision and moving toward the same direction.

At the onset of the New Society, several drastic and long-awaited changes within the system were launched to rid it of many of its cumbersome mechanisms accumulated through the years. The leadership of the new government recognized the need to set up a system which would generate a new breed of administrators who are committed to national development. The Development Academy of the Philippines was mandated to conceptualize and implement the training program which would prepare the public managers for the big tasks ahead.

The objective of the CESDP is to produce a corps of development executives and career administrators who will carry out the development tasks of the New Republic. The CESDP defines the development executives as "a knowledgeable and skillful administrator whose commitment is to development."² In the pursuit of this commitment, he assumes various roles, mainly those of:

(1) Expert — He is capable of identifying problems and solutions to them, recognizes the priorities of development tasks and applies his expertise to these task.

(2) Change agent — He knows the conditions and directions of change, understands his role in

helping people adjust to change and knows how to direct efforts toward change.

(3) Leader — He organizes and mobilizes people and resources, both natural and technological, to fulfill his tasks. He is dedicated to the execution of his plans, initiates policies to develop to the fullest the skills of his men, cooperates with other institutions and agencies engaged in development and brings together various groups to work for common development goals.

The participants of the CESDP are drawn from the ranks of government officers occupying any of the following positions:

- (1) Deputy Minister
- (2) Assistant Minister
- (3) Bureau Director
- (4) Assistant Bureau Director
- (5) Regional Director
- (6) Assistant Regional Director
- (7) Chief Ministry Service
- (8) Positions of equivalent rank to the above.

Heads of government ministries and agencies submit nominations from among incumbent officers and the Career Executive Service Board, the governing body of the CES, chooses the participants from among the nominees.

Far from being academic in its approach and orientation, the aim of the CESDP is to help government career executives become more effective administrators, rather than learned academicians or skilled technicians. The program consists of a 3-month residential phase and a 6-month field monitoring phase.

The 12-week formal training course covers the following mod-

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

ules:

- (1) Development Perspective
- (2) Dynamics of Human Behavior
- (3) Planned Change
- (4) Organizational Analysis and Change
- (5) Philippine Administrative System
- (6) Development Management

The action output for each participant is a Re-Entry Plan which has to be successfully implemented within the 6-month period immediately following the residential course. The Re-Entry Plans (REPs) are action programs developed by the participants during the residential portion of the training and which they are required to implement in their back-home situation. The REPs are evaluated by the CESDP Monitoring Staff. Satisfactory performance in both residential and monitoring phases are requisites for graduation in the program.

Satisfactory completion of CESDP and other requirements that may be prescribed by the CESB qualifies the CESDP participant to CES eligibility. Appointment to a CES rank is made by the President upon recommendation by the Board. An eligible appointed to CES rank is called a Career Executive Service Officer (CESO).

The Village Immersion Experience

Since its inception in 1973, the CESDP consistently upheld the belief that the best approach to learning is the experimental approach and this has been the distinguishing hallmark of the course. More than just a sequenced series of formal lectures and other classroom-bound activities,

the CESDP is one extended learning laboratory where participants find themselves in an atmosphere where new ideas can be tested and new behaviors can be tried out without fear of failure or rejection. A very collegial relationship is developed among the participants, the Training Staff, and the Faculty as they freely interact with one another, each encounter becoming a learning event. The CESDP Faculty is an interdisciplinary group of academicians and practitioners highly competent in their respective fields of expertise, while the Training Staff are professional trainers highly-skilled in managing learning processes.

The CESDP curriculum's contents and methodology are subjected to a regular reexamination by the Faculty. The core messages have remained to be essentially the same throughout the years but the methodologies have to be continuously re-assessed and adapted to suit the changing demands on the government executive. Such changing demands are brought about by the increasing pressure for developing countries to catch up, not with their Western counterparts, but with themselves.

This constant striving to take into account the realities that the CESO has to contend with gave birth to the idea of a Village Immersion.

By 1978 or five years after the establishment of the New Society, the national leadership felt that it was time to focus on direct development efforts which would benefit the great majority of Filipinos. The period between then and now has been characterized by an all-out effort to reach out to the countryside, to bring government programs to people who need these goods and

services most, and to activate sectors of the population, particularly the common man, in the development process. Programs for the people in the villages were designed in such a way that they will not remain passive recipients of dole-outs but instead become active partners, capable of making important decisions and acting on these decisions, individually or collectively.

A study of Philippine society will reveal patterns of stark contrasts and imbalances, a situation that the present leadership is trying to attack from various angles: through institutional reforms, policy statements, human resource development, and impact programs.

The CESDP, early in 1977, anticipating that the CESO will be caught in this mainstream of societal change and will be expected to assume leadership in bringing about a more balanced and equitable sharing of the benefits of development introduced a new module entitled *Planned Change*. The main objective of this Module was to confront the prospective CESO with glaring social inequalities existing in the country so that his acceptance of this situation may be the starting point of his own commitment to alter the picture, not so much through the top-to-bottom traditional manner of bringing about change, but through a participatory process where the main emphasis is on hastening the emergence of socially-competent communities or groups of people who are well-aware of their needs and are ready to work together for the fulfillment of these needs. While it has always been expected of the CESO to "systematically generate significant contributions for the greater welfare of the people," the pronounced thrust toward the promo-

tion of social development as a national development goal made it imperative for the CESDP to instill in the consciousness of the CESO the desire to generate innovative programs for those sectors in greatest need of government assistance so that they may get their just share and slowly rejoin the mainstream of national life.

In order to be able to realize this end, the CESDP had to create the situation where the course participants will be able to experience coming face to face with concrete social realities that they have always been in the midst of, but which they have not been able to come to grips with, so that by so doing they will begin to see better why the situation is the way it is and will begin to feel strongly what the need of the hour is. The CESDP faculty, after several deliberations, believed that this new perspective, in terms of the direction that national development should take, can be gained only through direct experience; hence the introduction of the Village Immersion as the experiential component of the Planned Change Module.

The module focuses on the following content areas:

- (1) Concept of Change
- (2) Process of Change
- (3) Dynamics of Change
- (4) Strategies of Change
- (5) Social Development
- (6) Social Impact Analysis
- (7) Citizen Participation
- (8) Roles and Skills of a Change Agent
- (9) Value Dilemmas of a Change Agent
- (10) Capability-Building Model, and
- (11) Culture of Poverty.

The Planned Change Module carries a very strong bias for the participatory approach to social development. Its primary tenet lies in the belief that man is both the object and subject of development.

Village Immersion requires the participants to live in depressed urban and rural communities for at least 25% of the entire duration of the residential phase: two months for the aspirants and three weeks for the incumbents. The Immersion has been primarily designed to make the participants experience and understand the realities, constraints, and opportunities found in mostly typical depressed rural/urban communities. From this experience and understanding, the predisposition to work for the balanced and equitable distribution of development opportunities and definite bias for the participatory approach in bringing about major changes in a community, in their society was expected to be developed.

Sites for the Village Immersion are preselected by the CESDP Training Staff, in close consultation with local officials and agencies. Criteria for site selection include the following:

- (1) the community must be a depressed community
- (2) the community must be relatively accessible to transportation facilities
- (3) the community, through their leaders, must manifest a willingness to accept the participants and become active participants in the experience
- (4) the community must be served by some government agencies
- (5) the peace and order situation in the community must not pose any serious threat to the participant's physical security and well-being.

Once taken into the village, the participants bind themselves to certain norms, such as:

- (1) No one may leave the community except during designated days;
- (2) No one may use private or official vehicle in coming to and from the sites;
- (3) No one should, in any way, exhibit any behavior which will set them apart from the community and invite extra or special attention.

The participants live with a host family (two participants to a family) chosen by the village leaders; they live as their hosts do, eat the same food, fetch water from the same well or spring, sleep on the floor. By doing so, they experience, though for a very short period of time, life in a village and hopefully begin to understand how distant they have become from this reality. As they begin to feel the helplessness and resignation of the people to their fate, their unawareness of government programs and modern methods, they also begin to experience the people's capacity to trust, to be motivated, to cooperate, to analyze their own problems; they see how benefits seldom reach the bottom because of problems of organization, communication, and a lack of appreciation of conditions at the grassroots on the part of the planners.

The Immersion becomes an opportunity to listen to the local people and to learn their real problems as program targets and beneficiaries. By living through the experience, instead of just reading about it or talking about it, the participants discover the importance of commitment, flexibility, and openness, and the value of translating this experience into their work as development managers. Furthermore, the participants also see for themselves and thus

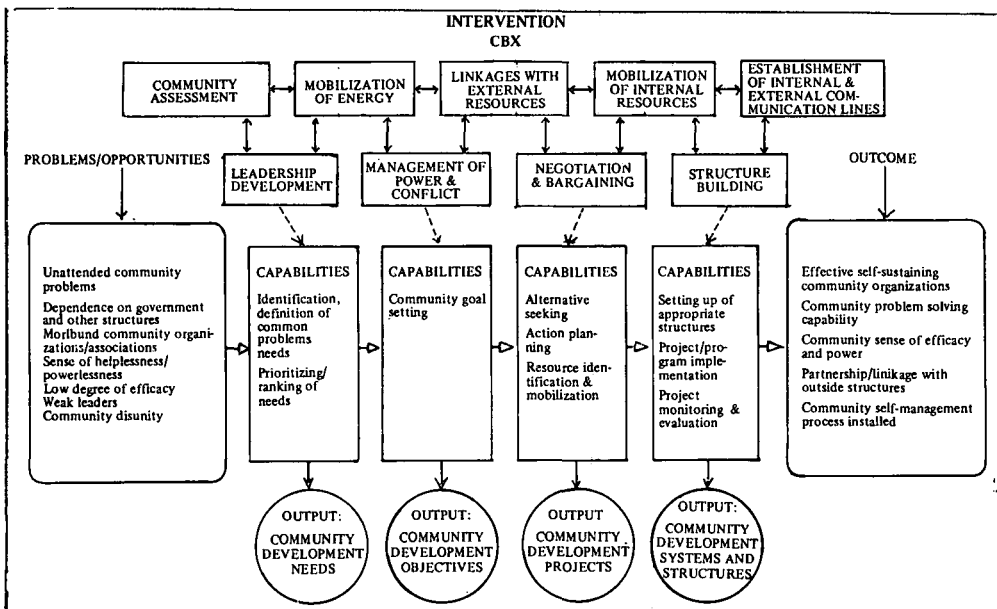
begin to understand the sentiments, frustrations, and dilemmas of field personnel who are responsible for providing government services directly to the people. All these begin to happen to them out as they walk under the blistering sun and feel the drops of perspiration running down their backs, as they sit among the menfolk and exchange light banter, as well as serious reflections, on some village dynamics, as they see in their minds so many children and the courageous efforts of their parents to give them the barest essentials of a human life.

Much of the transformation within the person is part of the planned and structured intervention that the Village Immersion is designed to be. For one thing, the participants do not move into villages unprepared. The two preceding modules (Development Perspectives and Dynamics of Human Behavior) psychologically and emotionally set them up as to be optimally open to the Immersion experience.

To provide technical grounding, the participants use the Capability-

Building Exercise (CBX) model (see Figure 1) as a framework for examining community dynamics and exploring the possibilities of harnessing community energies for national development. The CBX model is a community management technology evolved by the Development Academy of the Philippines to help development managers understand the processes involved in mobilizing and activating local communities for development efforts. It is an indigenous model that takes into consideration the nature of communities struggling under the weight of problems besetting developing countries. It unfolds a scheme which operationalizes the principles of people's participation and self-reliance in terms of very concrete problem-solving tasks and activities that a community can be expected to learn within a given period of time — task and activities which will equip these communities with the skills, concepts and orientation that will enable them to participate in and benefit from such programs and services as may be planned and implemented for and by them.

FIGURE 1. THE CAPABILITY BUILDING EXERCISE (CBX MODEL)



If in the past, the tendency was to dump programs, goods, and services at the receiver's door without so much caring as to whether these were congruent with his needs or not, the CBX model makes it possible for the beneficiaries to go through the step-by-step process of identifying and prioritizing their needs, setting their goals and working hard to realize these goals either on their own or in collaboration with the government. The CBX model is the primary tool of analysis that the participants bring with them to their villages. In instances when they could stay longer than a month, they were encouraged to initiate the community problem-solving process that the CBX model sets off; but in instances when they could stay only for three weeks, they used the model only to assess the level of capabilities that they perceive in the community and relate these to other variables in the environment, particularly to the quality of the government delivery system at the grassroots level. Having been introduced to this model of participative community building and having applied the basic processes involved in the capability building exercise, the participants begin to believe that it is indeed possible for the people to change the existing social picture in active partnership with government — a belief that is eventually carried into their work and finds expression in the support they give to programs and plans that results in a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development.

There are then two distinct learning components of the Village Immersion experience which directly aim at attitude development and character-building.

The first one is the *sensitizing* component where by simply being with the people 24 hours a day, skipping a meal not because he wants to, but because there is no food to eat, sharing their privations, feeling their helplessness, the individual participant begins to realize what life is like for the great majority of Filipinos. Somehow, the participants' present positions, well earned by years of education and hard work, have alienated them from their roots. Years spent sitting behind the desk, signing papers, and attending a seemingly endless chain of meetings can make one lose touch with the people, as one is easily led into thinking that what he is doing is necessarily doing the ordinary man some good. The Village Immersion creates the occasion for the participant to shed off the layers of sophistication and superficialities he might have acquired through the years and surrender himself to the simple ways of the village folks. In the village, there are no deadlines to beat, no visitors to hide from, no inane cocktail parties to put up with; there is only a community of people with their own dreams and aspirations but fearful and anxious for the future because of many reasons. The participant takes in all of these — without making any judgment or jumping to conclusions. The experience becomes an intensely experiential one as he allows the different faces of the reality to unfold before him and slowly get into his own being, slowly changing his perspective of the situation, slowly changing his own perceptions about himself, and about the people.

The following diary entry of a participant catches the spirit characteristic of the sensitizing com-

ponent of the Village Immersion experience:

May 6, Saturday

It rained this afternoon and I was overwhelmed by the distinctive smell of nature as the rain touched the parched earth while the coffee, kaimito and langka trees, and the flowers, too thirstily drank from the raindrops, their leaves gleaming proud and green under the Amadeo sun. It is a moment rare and distinct, a commune with nature.

But the beautiful moment was fleeting. No sooner had I smelled the earth than when nature's fragrance from my favorite open pit pervaded the surroundings — stirred too by the silvery raindrops. Pretty soon the aroma of the pigeon filled the air and the mixture of all these smells created an odor so unique yet familiar — the smell of poverty . . . what makes this so? I have a few ideas now but my facts are not yet enough. I should know the people more . . .

The second component is the *awakening* part where the participant now starts reflecting on the reality that he has come face to face with and begins to ask why this is so; he investigates and tries to unlock some hidden patterns behind observable behaviors; he interacts with the people and think things out with them; he shares his doubts and anxieties with his co-participants and the faculty, half-hoping he will find in them the assurance that they are experiencing the same painful process; he begins to see where the gaps are. And the realization may either frighten him, humble him, or make him very angry with himself, with the situation. It is when he has gotten to this point that the Village Immersion can be said to have taken effect. Another diary entry of a participant illustrates when the point of awakening dawns upon the person:

The barrio immersion was rewarding. The wisdom that was gained from the experience cannot at all be obtained from the classroom and from books. One has to go through it, experience it, to be able to understand and appreciate its value.

For one, I have found myself and re-discovered the meaning of my being in government. I found strength to support my convictions concerning public service and to affirm my decision of leaving the more secure world of the academe two and a half years ago to join our oftentimes anemic and confused bureaucracy. As a government official there is much more opportunity for me to help the real people. More than anything else, however, I came to know the barrio men more intimately once again. I relearned his values, his aspirations, his ways, his mores, his customs and traditions. Somehow the years in the city, the travels abroad and the urban culture have blighted, if not altered, my image of the barrio man . . . There were times when my faith in the barrio man would almost be lost and my convictions for him would almost be shattered . . . The Village Immersion brought me back to a point in time seventeen years ago when I left my barrio (village) with an unspoken promise to make good in the city, acquire power and influence and use these power and influence to liberate my barrio (village) from the quagmire of poverty and the claws of oppression and exploitation.

The sensitizing and awakening components are not separate from each other, even if the level of learning and degree of internalization that is triggered do differ. Catching a glimpse of a family of six huddled around a plate of food while one had a plateful all to oneself can be a highly sensitizing stimulus but taken singly, it may not be sufficient to bring the person to a point of awakening. Both components intermingle at various points in time and converge to form a lasting impression on the entire

being of a person going through the experience.

To heighten awareness of the changes slowly occurring inside them, some learning mechanisms were set up as part of the Village Immersion experience.

The faculty conducts weekly processing sessions with the participants during which the events of the past week are reviewed and plans for the next week are presented; doubts are surfaced and shared; strong feelings about certain beliefs are maintained and upheld. It is largely during these sessions that participants are helped to become aware of what is happening to them, to abstract insights from their day-to-day encounters with the people, and express these newly-found or re-discovered thoughts in new outlooks and attitudes. To facilitate the process of capturing these insights, feelings, and thoughts, participants are required to keep a diary into which they enter their own narratives of significant events in the village. By jotting these events down when they are fresh and full of meaning, the participants are able to preserve high points and low points of their sensitizing and awakening moments. These diaries become the basis of reflection papers which they submit weekly to the faculty who religiously go through each one and take note of the progress the participant is making in terms of learning objectives. Graduates of the course claim that their barrio Immersion diary has become one of their valued possessions and they find themselves going back to it whenever they feel the need to renew the commitment to the people.

Terms, such as "coaching", "Priming," and "Cliniquing," were coined

to describe the forms of interaction that the participants had with the village folks. Since the Immersion experience was also supposed to benefit the village people, the use of the CBX model as a framework for community intervention, to the extent that this was possible, equipped the participants with some basic change-agent attitudes and behaviors so that for the short duration of their stay in the village, they are able to help their host communities take a better look at themselves, assess their present situation, examine the resources they have left unutilized and revive faith and confidence in their local leaders. During their stay in the village, participants are strongly warned against taking on an expert role or assuming a prescriptive stance as far as diagnosing community problems and looking for alternative solutions to these problems are concerned. They are instead asked to take on a facilitator's role so that in an informal fashion, they are able to help the community experience the CBX cycle to the extent that this is possible during the Village Immersion period.

Besides daily journalizing and weekly processing sessions with the faculty, the participants also hold frequent meetings among themselves to check the extent to which their learning objectives are being met. Because of this system, sources of actual and potential conflict or distractions to the learning process are detected early enough and resolved. Individual learning objectives are examined, together with group learning objectives; participants' concerns are processed vis-a-vis those of the staff and the faculty; rising expectations of the community on account of their presence are considered. All these forces that the participants have to struggle

with are openly and often painfully discussed. During these discussions changes in attitudes slowly begin to take place. It is as one shares with the processing group one particularly striking incident that the person is moved to a point where he asks himself important questions, which the group in turn helps him to articulate, explore, and tentatively find answers to.

One of the basic attitudes that the CESDP wishes to develop in the CESO is a commitment to development by addressing government assistance to those sectors of the disadvantaged population whose readiness and potential capability for self-help have been proven time and again. The Village Immersion experience can be said to be a truly effective way of forming this attitude. The CESDP, particularly through the Village Immersion, hopes to provide the initial attempts for a more conscious, directed, and concerted effort to deliver development programs and services, through an effective government administrative system, to those who need these programs and services most.

The totality of the Village Immersion forces the participants into a situation where they are made to come face-to-face with concrete social realities so that they are moved to examine their own priorities and values. First-hand exposure to the everyday life of the poor Filipino goes a long way in pushing the participant to a point where he begins to see where the imbalances are and where his contributions as a CESO may be most badly needed.

The Village Immersion hopes to extract from the participants a commitment to national development not only by generating an increase in resources but also by making possible a more equitable sharing of resources. The participants' first-hand experiences with the people, as well as their introduction to participatory models of community involvement, such as the Academy's CBX models, puts them in a better position to initiate or support efforts of the national government to transform communities into self-reliant communities with a sense of direction and dignity.