

Esperanza

**Commencement Speech at the Asian Institute of Management:
Master in Development Management Program Graduation Ceremony, 31 July 2009**



**- Rajat M. Nag
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Present:

Members of the AIM Board of Trustees
President de Jesus
Dean Licuanan
Associate Dean Confesor
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Distinguished AIM Faculty
Director of the Alumni Association, Mme. Jimenez
Class of 2009
Parents and Friends of the Graduating Class

Ladies and gentlemen:

It is truly an honor for me to be invited to speak to the Class of 2009 graduating today with this prestigious degree of Master in Development Management. Thank you!!

Class of 2009: My warmest congratulations to you all. I understand that over the past 11 months of your very demanding program you have been in class for over 400 hours; so, the last thing you need is another lecture. I will therefore not give one; I will instead try to share with you some of my thoughts on the field of endeavour you and I have chosen to dedicate ourselves to: human development.

Human development is more than economic development alone; more than higher incomes alone.

Human development is about enlarging one's choices. Choice to live a long and healthy life rather than be dead by the age of five; choice to go to school whether one is a girl or a boy; choice to be educated.

Choice to clean water and sanitation. Choice to be free of hunger; choice to develop one's capability to the fullest, unconstrained by circumstances of birth and the burdens of prejudice.

Choice to be free: free to express one's beliefs and views; be free from persecution, free from discrimination. Choice to guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect.

And, thus Class of 2009: as you leave this hall tonight suitably honored and deservedly felicitated for your well earned degree, remember this: your calling is a calling well beyond what can be measured in dollars and cents; your calling goes to the very core of human existence: helping people achieve dignity, respect, and freedom to choose.

Asians today are generally richer, healthier, and better educated than they were a generation ago. Strong economic growth has lifted hundreds of millions of Asians out of poverty in recent decades. In 1970, about 50% of Asians were poor, measured at a dollar a day; that figure is now less than 20% or less than 1 in 5. That indeed is a remarkable achievement. By 2020, we expect that number to further decrease to 1 in 10.

Today, Asia's output roughly equals that of Europe or North America; by 2020, it may become 50% larger. By 2040, 3 of the world's largest economies will be in Asia: China, India, and Japan. All of these are cause for celebration. You only have to step out of this hall to see evidence of this impressive economic growth. The shining towers of Makati are an appropriate metaphor for the shining, prosperous face of Asia.

Yet, consider these: More than 600 million people in Asia live on less than a dollar a day. About 700 million people do not have access to clean water; about 1.9 billion do not have access to improved sanitation. A hundred million children in Asia are not enrolled in primary schools. And, about 107 million children under the age of five in Asia are underweight. This is the other face—not so bright, not so shining, but no less real.

Class of 2009: your challenge is not to forget this not so shining face; more than that, your challenge is to help these two faces of Asia converge.

Class of 2009: as development managers, you will not be able to hide behind macro numbers, or macro analyses conducted from the splendid isolation of your offices far above the din. You will have to feel the flesh and blood underlying the cold statistics.

So, what does 107 million underweight children under the age of five really mean? Before you can answer that, make the child come alive. Give her a name. I call mine "Esperanza". It means that little Esperanza has probably gone to bed hungry for each or most of the 1825 nights that she has lived so far. And, there are 107 million Esperanzas in Asia.

So, you see, Class of 2009, not only will you be expected to "know" the statistics, you will also be expected to "feel" the statistics and stay awake at night worrying about Esperanza.

Class of 2009: armed with the prestigious MDM, now prepare yourself for the grind. I remember my first day at work. Fresh with my degree similar to yours, I was ready to go conquer the world, take on all the challenges the world dared to throw at me, and all of this as the top honcho, of course; well, if not quite the top honcho, nothing less than the Vice President would do. I got my first job as the junior most gopher. And, my wise boss gave me a calculator (no desk tops then), and my first assignment: prepare a spread sheet which involved nothing more than a series of multiplications (no Excel spread sheets then either). And, for a numbing week, (or was it a month), I did nothing but that. Welcome to reality: but what a great experience!! And every assignment since then has been nothing short of pure joy and fun.

Let me share with you one lesson I have learned over the years; one which I hope you will find helpful as a development professional—the need for humility. A humility based on an appreciation of how much of what we are, what we have become is due to twists of fate, help, "leg ups", and opportunities that happened to come our way. A humility which will stand you in good stead as you meet many unsung heroes who face major hurdles in just making it through the day, and yet they do; men and women to whom life has not necessarily dealt a particularly favorable hand, and yet who go through their lives with nary a complaint, but with pride and dignity instead.

I thus urge you to be humble—never forgetting that while the differences that separate the powerful from the powerless, the privileged from the underprivileged, rich from the poor, can be many, the reasons behind those differences are often few.

One of the most pleasant tasks I have at ADB is the opportunity I get to welcome all newcomers to the Bank. And, when I do, I always ask: who do you work for? And, the answer correctly is: Ms. Y or Mr. X. I ask them again: who do you work for? And, the answer again correctly is: Ms. Y, Head of Department A. And, I ask again: who do you work for? And, I ask you, Class of 2009 the same question: who will you work for?

I believe that Ms. Y or Mr. X is only our intermediate boss; in fact, we all, you, me, Ms. Y and Mr. X work for the same ultimate boss: "Esperanza". She is the reason we are in the development business. She is the only one who matters in answering the question: in what I am about to do, will it make a difference for her? If the answer is yes, then go ahead and do it. Do it with all your heart, with all your passion. The rewards will be priceless to you. If the answer is no, if what you are about to do makes no difference to her, doesn't make her life any better, then you are wasting your time.

Ask yourself: will it make a difference to her? With this huge education program I am about to support, will she get a school to go to? And even if there is a physical school building, will there be teachers there to teach her?

If I support and fund this Justice Reform Program, will she have access to justice? Will she be able to walk to the local police station without fear to complain against the local chief?

If I support this massive and expensive health program, will she be able to get the vaccinations she needs? Will she get the medical attention she deserves? Will she then grow into a young lady whose child can be brought into this world without endangering her and her baby's lives?

The questions are not easy to answer. The journey won't be easy. The choices will be difficult. The resources will never be enough, but passing any proposed activity through the litmus test: "will it make a difference for Esperanza?" will set you on the right course.

There will be many who will say "what difference can you make: What difference can one make?" I say: ignore them. They have not seen the gleam in the eyes of the child who walks into her first school. They have not felt the joy of the mother whose child has just recovered from a bout of illness. They have not felt the sheer relief of the young girl who does not have to walk for hours to fetch water.

So, go ahead; make a difference to Esperanza. She needs you. Indeed, you owe it to her. Much has been given to you; much is expected of you.

Families and friends of the Class of 2009. I am sure you have been a source of great strength, support, and motivation to the graduates. Congratulations!! You must be very proud of them as indeed we all are.

Class of 2009: Congratulations; well done!!

All the very best.

Thank you!!