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Bringing about fullness of life with care and compassion: Learnings from the social enterprise of the Good Shepherd Sisters

One of the principles of the Church's social teachings is integral human development. In his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI stated that "*authentic human development is the development of the whole human being and of all human beings.*" The importance of individuals as human beings is also rooted in the conviction of St. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier, foundress of the Good Shepherd Sisters, who kept reminding her daughters that "*a person is of more value than the whole world.*"

The Integral Human Development Approach guides the business model of the Mountain Maid Training Center (MMTC) in Baguio, which is a food processing and income-generating enterprise operated and maintained by the Religious of Good Shepherd (RGS) in the Philippines. The enterprise brings into reality RGS' mission by providing work to the economically disadvantaged, supporting the college education and technical training of the youth, and sharing the Word of God in many communities. In addition, MMTC forms its stakeholders into wholesome and morally upright individuals. Aside from skills development and training, MMTC also gives emphasis on developing good habits of industry, honesty, responsibility, teamwork, and commitment to duty.

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The business model of the RGS can provide an alternative management framework for business students and teachers, and entrepreneurs.

From scrap vegetables to strawberry jams

In 1952, the Good Shepherd Sisters were asked by then Bishop William Brasseur, CICM to establish a special apostolate for the Cordilleran youth from the provinces of Apayao, Abra, the Mountain Province, Kalinga, Ifugao and Benguet. They started operating a dormitory school for Igorot girls in Mines View Park.

The perennial problem for food compelled the sisters to beg for scrap vegetables from the market to feed the growing population of Igorot children entrusted to their care. However, this cycle could not go on if they were to feed 200 children every day. With the abundance of strawberries that are highly perishable, and the sisters' talents and dedication, a rolling store for strawberry jams was first set up in Baguio City. Their realization that the work in helping the poor could not be sustained without regular income gave birth to their social enterprise, which is the MMTC. Soon after, other sisters assigned to the Baguio convent developed more products, and the direction of the dormitory school evolved. Today, through the support of MMTC, thousands of youth workers have graduated from college and vocational courses offered by universities and schools in Baguio City. Some have become agriculturists, caregivers, doctors, engineers, nurses, nuns, priests, policemen, teachers, and all of whom have greatly contributed to the uplifting of their respective communities.

The Cordillera: A snapshot

The Cordillera, also known as Montanosa, through Executive Order No. 220 by President Corazon Aquino dated July 15, 1987, was declared an autonomous region officially called the Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR).

The region is composed of six provinces: Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, and Mountain Province, and one city, Baguio. There are 75 municipalities and 1,151 barangays in this region, which has a total land area of 1,829,368 hectares.

Most people of the Cordillera are farmers who live off rice or camote. *Gabi* and yams are not the important foods they used to be, and corn is not widespread. Except in the Trinidad Valley and the Tabuk Plain, these crops have to be planted on the steep mountainsides by much hard work in swiddens or stone-walled terraces that have complicated irrigation systems. Nowadays, these terraces are used only for rice and they exist in all four of the mountain provinces, though those of Banawe, Ifugao, have become famous among tourists as the "Eight Wonder of the World." Many of them are so steep that the height of the wall exceeds the width of the field it retains. Families raise pigs and chickens. Carabaos are valued as draft animals for fields large enough to be plowed, but cows are rare and never milked (Filipino Heritage, vol. 3, 709).

The Cordillera is considered among the poorest regions in the Philippines. The Religious of Good Shepherd, through MMTC, provides scholarships to the less privileged youth in the region, provides employment for the lay, and supports the various ministries of the congregation in the region.

How the Good Shepherd Sisters' zeal embraced the Cordillera

As a social enterprise, MMTC offers a wide variety of products that are popular among tourists that visit Baguio city during the summer months and Christmas season.



Some products of MMTC

Some of these include strawberry jam, purple yam (*ube*) jam, cookies, bread, pastries, peanut brittle, ham and bacon, artificial flowers, and all-occasion cards and decors.

True to its commitment to the people of Cordillera, MMTC began to engage in assisting rural parishes in 2004 through its Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) Outreach Program. Being managed by a religious congregation, MMTC gives emphasis on outreach activities to engage local communities through spiritual formation activities.

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) defines BECs as small communities of Christians, usually of families who gather together around the Word of God and the Eucharist. These communities are united by their pastors but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name, and share not only the Word of God and the Eucharist but also their concerns—both material and spiritual. They have a strong sense of belongingness and responsibility towards one another (PCP II 138). BEC members share their resources and find ways to help and serve one another and those who are poor and address their problems. BECs carry out a crucial role in ensuring the nurturing of the faith by coming together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion of human and ecclesial problems especially in rural areas where priests are scarce and jurisdictions are large. Moreover, some BECs in the rural areas have set up communal farms and some have organized cooperatives (CBCB-BEC).

The pioneer areas selected by MMTC are the villages where their student workers come from. The process begins with the MMTC Outreach Coordinator conducting a series of consultations with several Church and local stakeholders and obtaining the consensus of the families to enter into a formation process. Families are then grouped according to their physical accessibility and proximity from each other and undergo modular workshops on BEC. Depending on each BEC's capacity and geographical makeup, members eventually take on the responsibilities of leading weekly gatherings in the celebration of Masses and other spiritual activities.

Consequently, the BEC Outreach Program opened opportunities both for the MMTC and the community members who happened to be farming *ube*. MMTC provided assistance to the farmers to be organized as farming associations and introduced the possibility of the farmers being part of the MMTC social enterprise not as

suppliers only, but also as partners. Aside from conducting continuous BEC activities in the farming communities, MMTC also provided for the other needs of the farmers in terms of improving their farming practices. MMTC coordinated with local government, agriculture agencies, and state universities to provide seminars and technical training to the farmers. These include crop management, financial literacy, and developing of by-laws and policies of the farming associations.



Ube being prepared by the workers for jam processing

Serving the common good and spiritual well-being of society

MMTC, as a social enterprise, is alert and conscious of opportunities not only to sustain its Student Worker Program, but it also attends to the needs of the underserved farmers in the Cordillera. One of the farmer leaders, Robert Carinio, mentions, *“aside from the BEC, MMTC helps us how to organize our associations better by facilitating trainings in creating by-laws, orientation to new members, and other policies. MMTC also coordinates with local agencies to give trainings on how to improve our farming practices or if there are problems in our ube crops”* (personal communication, 14 May 2017).

The BEC Outreach Program is not only conducted as a form of social responsibility, but it also sets forth great business opportunity. By creating relationships with farmers, products and services improve; and more importantly, farmers develop as better individuals, spiritually and economically. Magdalena Paraogan, MMTC Outreach Program Coordinator, shares that: *“Through the BEC, a common understanding among farmers is established. By*

producing good quality ube, they are able to send a poor Cordilleran to college. That becomes their motivation to work with us, to help, and not only for personal gains in the form of profit” (personal communication, 14 May 2017).

For the Good Shepherd Sisters, respect for human dignity and the common good are foundational principles that enterprises must emphasize in organizing human capital (e.g., employees, scholars, suppliers, partners, and communities). Hilda Emiliano, a farmer leader, says *“our relationship with MMTC is more than business-supplier type. We are really partners. We meet regularly to talk about delivery volume and schedule, and we discuss the buying-selling price. We really honor our commitments because we also know that if we cannot deliver the ube, it will affect the business and the student-workers”* (personal communication, 14 May 2017).

Indeed, developing policies, procedures, and structures guided by labor laws contributes to the development and growth of its stakeholders. But more importantly, by placing its workers and partners in the center of its operations, a business can foster active engagement and participation of stakeholders as well as establish a sense of accountability. In the case of MMTC, by conducting BEC Outreach Programs and highlighting the importance of nurturing the faith of the communities where it operates, resources are shared, the poor are provided with livelihood opportunities, and high-quality products are produced. The financial sustainability of an enterprise becomes the consequence of the business principles that are anchored on integral human development. Marcita Basilia, a farmer leader, shares: *“As a farmer-partner, we are more committed because we share the mission of MMTC to help those who are in need. We also feel that we are really part*

Table 1. Six Practical Principles for Business as applied by the Good Shepherd Sisters

Six Practical Principles For Business	MMTC Practices
1. Businesses that produce goods which are truly good and services which truly serve to contribute the common good.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous expansion of product lines • Use of first class ingredients • Products are developed through clean processes • Quality and quantity of the contents are described on label
2. Businesses maintain solidarity with the poor by being alert for opportunities to serve otherwise deprived and underserved population and people in need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-worker program • Employment to the lay • Conduct of BEC outreach activities • Contract-growing scheme with partner farmers
3. Businesses make contribution to the community by fostering the dignity of human work.	Student-workers and lay-workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselling and career guidance to student-workers • Participation of student-workers’ parents in MMTC decision-making
4. Businesses provide, through subsidiarity, opportunities for employees to exercise appropriate authority as they contribute to the mission of the organization.	Student-workers and lay-workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in discussions about concerns in the workplace • Guided to live within their means Farmer Partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freely manage their own associations • Option to sell produce in the open market
5. Businesses model stewardship of the resources – whether capital, human, or environmental – they have received.	Student-workers and lay-workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensations are guided by the provisions of labor laws • Receive benefits that are over and above those provided by law
6. Businesses are just in allocation of resources to all stakeholders: employees, customers, investors, suppliers, and the community.	Farmers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss production commitments • Receive higher buying price

of the business. The BEC and other formation activities that we participate in, we know that they are not only for the spiritual aspect, but also for us to become better farmers who can work together and help others as well” (personal communication, 14 May 2017).

Table 1 shows how MMTC is able to promote human dignity and common good in the Cordillera through its practices that are anchored on the integral development of its workers, beneficiaries, and partner farmers.

Principle 1

What the business world sees as a competitive advantage is no more than the expected lifestyle of the Good Shepherd Sisters inspired by their foundress, St. Mary Euphrasia’s words addressed to them, and addressed in turn by them to everyone with whom they work: “Do well all that you do.”

Every Sister assigned to MMTC was highly motivated to offer her knowledge, skills, and talents to the enterprise that led to the expansion of its product lines. These products were branded as products made by the nuns and became highly appealing to the Filipinos and tourists. In creating its products, MMTC uses high quality materials and ingredients, ensures clean production process, and makes sure that quality and content are as described on the labels. And having a spiritual dimension clearly communicated in every product sold, consumers are informed of the mission and vision of MMTC, which is what compelled the nuns to go on business in the first place.

Principles 2

The workforce of MMTC comprises mostly of student workers from economically disadvantaged families from the six provinces of the Cordillera: Abra, Benguet, Apayao, Kalinga, Mt. Province, and Ifugao. During peak seasons of Christmas, the flower Festival every February, Holy Week, and the summer seasons, MMTC hires additional seasonal workers that include the lay, out-of-school youth, alumni, and the mothers of workers.

The MMTC directly buys fresh strawberries and *ube* from its partner farmers through a contract-growing scheme that eliminates middlemen and assures farmers of a sure market and a better price. Farmers are also free to sell their produce in the open market when they become expensive. The relationship between MMTC and farmers also go beyond business-supplier relationship. As its partner, MMTC

Outreach staff regularly visits the farmers to engage in formation activities such as bible study, reflection and faith-life dialogues, and find solutions to problems.

Principle 3

MMTC takes into consideration the welfare of its workers by involving them in the decision-making process as well as giving attention to both personal and work concerns. In order for student-workers to balance their academic and work responsibilities, MMTC provides counselling and assistance to student-workers on school issues and career guidance. MMTC also sets mentoring and coaching sessions on personal and professional growth, financial management, and spiritual development to all its workers.

MMTC recognizes too the importance of involving the community in making decisions especially on matters that involve their student-workers. Student-workers’ parents are gathered to acquaint them about the mission of MMTC, its scope and limitations as employer and guardian of their children who are all minors. The roles and responsibilities of MMTC over their children for the duration of the employment are also discussed. Lastly, issues and concerns about their children—both work and school-related—are raised with the parents and they come up with mutually agreed solutions.

Principle 4

Subsidiarity, among the most constant and characteristic directives of the Church’s social doctrine, means that business and other secular activities, such as governance, should be as local as possible. It is based on autonomy and dignity of the human individual, and holds that all other forms of society should be in the service of the human person. In the case of MMTC, subsidiarity is in the form of workers being able to freely share relevant suggestions and ideas, and participate in discussions about concerns in the workplace. Workers are also given the opportunity to discuss with MMTC work schedules/shifts to consider their school and/or personal (e.g., household duties, farm duties, and community duties) commitments.

In the case of how MMTC works with its partner communities, specifically its farmer partners, the farmers freely manage their own associations/groups and develop by-laws and other policies that guide their relationship with MMTC. Even with the contract-growing scheme between them, farmers can still sell their crops in the open market

when prices are high. This gives them the opportunity to earn more. But during the rest of the season when prices fluctuate, farmers prefer that stable price set by MMTC.

Principles 5 and 6

The importance MMTC gives to its workers and farmers is consistent with the RGS congregation's insights as defined by its foundress St. Mary Euphrasia, and social encyclicals. For MMTC, its most valuable assets are its human resources. To invest in their human development is the logical consequence of this insight.

The workers of MMTC receive additional benefits such as subsidized lunch, free morning and afternoon snack, special meals and snacks on feast days and celebrations, over-the-counter medicines, free uniforms every 2 years, birthday and Christmas gifts, donation on the death of immediate family members (parents, legitimate children), additional 2 days of Service Incentive Leave, interest-free housing loan after some years of employment, retirement plan, use of available sports facilities. In addition, MMTC gives cultural, spiritual, professional benefits on paid time such as Christian formation classes, recollections and retreats, Eucharistic celebrations, and sports and cultural fests.

For its farmer partners, they are given the opportunity to discuss and plan with MMTC crop commitments and delivery schedules, the projected volume of delivery, and the indicative buying price. Farmers also get a higher buying price from MMTC: 14% to 23% higher in price per kilogram compared to the traders. MMTC also facilitates regularly outreach activities not only for livelihood and skills training, but also for their spiritual formation and development.

Conclusion

Lessons from MMTC show that by being responsive to the physical, affective, and spiritual facets of the human person (i.e., workers and farmer partners), a social enterprise can become innovative and financially sustainable, making it realize its mission in assisting the economically-deprived.

Further, business practices grounded on wider community involvement, Christian ethics, and that are responsive to poverty issues not only contribute to the growth and vitality

of the enterprise, but also create and enhance healthy working relationships, teamwork, collaboration, personal growth and professional advancement of its stakeholders. As a social enterprise, MMTC's success can be attributed to its mission to serve the common good through authentic human development that focuses on the multidimensional growth of its stakeholders.

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