

# crafting social engagement for community building: towards a conscientised generation

SPECIAL PAPER BY  
DR AZHAR IBRAHIM ALWEE  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

COMMUNITY LEADERS FORUM



Celebrating Excellence  
Community Leaders' Forum

# Crafting Social Engagement for Community Building: Towards a Conscientised Generation

Azhar Ibrahim Alwee  
National University of Singapore

“Engagement and objective distance, understanding reality as object, understanding the significance of men’s action upon objective reality, creative communication about the object by means of language, plurality of responses to a single challenge – these varied dimensions testify to the existence of critical reflection in men’s relationships with the world. Consciousness is constituted in the dialectic of man’s objectification of and action upon the world. Yet consciousness is never a mere reflection of but a reflection upon material reality.”

Paulo Freire

A discursive engagement that brings about greater consciousness, and the nurturing of a critical spirit is significant in any meaningful community building initiative. To discuss and problematise the need to craft social engagement, which is instrumental in the process of community building, is both an intellectual exercise as well as a moral-ethical commitment. To have a sense of community means the existence of a sense of connectedness, that is, feeling belonged to a group which shares common identity, history and destiny. Another sense of being in a community is also the *experience of struggling* in the face of non-recognition, or humiliation, and this is where social engagement should deliberate, address, and challenge whenever necessary. A conscientised generation is one that able to confront and engage with those ideas and practices that stunted the path of progress and development of the community. Its reflexivity is integral in pursuing an educative engagement, with combative engagement made occasionally in cases where the problems become prolonged and disruptive.

The vision towards harnessing a conscientised generation is part of this community-building idealism. A conscientised generation means one that has evolved from and overcome the limitations from that of *magical consciousness* to *naïve consciousness* and to one that can be referred to as *critical consciousness*. The latter, in Paulo Freire’s definition is crucial to be understood.

“The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one’s “findings” and by openness to revisions; by the attempt to avoid distortions when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to new reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old – by accepting what is valid in both old and new.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 18

Social engagement seen as part of a process of conscientization means to nurture the thinking that is opposed to domestication, and imitation, and domination of thought. We nurture civic courage and democratic spirit, through engagement where the people take part in engaging on the issues of society alongside their leaders.

“Critical consciousness is brought about, not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis – through the authentic union of action and reflection. Such reflective action cannot be denied to the people. If it were, the people would be no more than activist pawns in the hands of a leadership that reserved itself the right of decision making.”<sup>2</sup>

Most importantly, reference to a conscientised generation, (or to be precise, a generation/society affirming conscientization,) does not mean that the process of conscientization has been completed and attained. Instead it is an indispensable process, and on-going with the aim of nurturing of a conscientised generation. “Conscientization is first of all the efforts to enlighten men about the obstacles preventing them from a clear perception of reality. In this role, conscientization effects the ejection of cultural myths that confuse the people’s awareness and make them ambiguous beings.”<sup>3</sup> In our case, the manifestation of such myths can range from the culture deficit, dysfunctional family structure, the indolent behaviours and mindset problems of the Malays, and many other blame-the-victim type of conclusions, which have been invariably harped upon to explain the cause of the community’s underdevelopment.<sup>4</sup> The challenges of nurturing and affirming conscientisation are many. Although this is not the place to discuss the subject of conscientisation in greater details, it is suffice to note of the danger of bureaucratization of conscientisation, where, “in losing its dynamism and thus fossilizing, ends up transforming conscientization into a sort of rainbow of recipes - another mystification.”<sup>5</sup>

## Focus of Discussion

In all developing societies, community building is a facet that cannot be ignored. A meaningful community building should be seen as integral to nation-building, while the latter should mean beyond the state-building. Community building must be integrative, both at inter and intra levels, with a primary aim towards an organized society, since in the words of Cornel West, “a disorganized society cannot generate conceptions of its alternative future or act on them.”<sup>6</sup> Here we shall focus on an aspect essential for community building, namely the importance of social engagement. To deliberate that, we shall divide this discussion into three parts. First, we shall discuss the constituents and purpose of social engagement. Second is adult-youth nexus.

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: culture, power, and liberation*. (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), p. 87

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 89

<sup>4</sup> For a critical survey on this issue read, Suriani Suratman, “Problematic Singapore Malays”: the making of a portrayal. Occasional Paper Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Freire, *The Politics of Education*, p. 172

<sup>6</sup> Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*. (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999), p. 326



Whenever we speak of the need to get a productive involvement and participation of youths in the process of community building, we must consider the adults' equation in the dynamics. Third is the craft of community building, linking the earlier two points as the basis towards crafting/weaving a fabric of community which is called a conscentised generation. The last part of the paper highlights the need of *cultural circle* as an approach and platform to garner social engagement that is instrumental in community building. We shall elaborate and evaluate the significance of the above three points while at the same time highlighting the obstacles and challenges that impede our efforts towards creating a conscentised generation.

## Understanding Social Engagement

What is then social engagement? Engagement entails the examining and exploring, delineating and demystifying, countering and contesting some of the persistent problematic ideas, inasmuch as providing possible alternatives in addressing to the current challenges and predicament of the community. The moment we defined social engagement it must involve, amongst others, the realms of discoursing ideas; of debating issues and policies affecting the society; of ensuring ideas communicated across the society, especially pertaining to the alternative ideas pertinent for the wellbeing of society; of harnessing the consciousness and concern for society and its constituents, and of challenging ideas and practices that dehumanized and humiliates the community.

Without the need to be fixed by a definite definition, we shall only highlight what some of the obstacles in social engagement are. It is best that we see the social engagement in the following traits. Amongst others, ( a ) it is a space accessible to members of public, with no groups allowed to garb themselves as the sole custodian of the discourse/ideas; ( b ) it has the clear purpose to discuss about the problems and challenges of society, and the motivation of the engagement propelled by the common concerns; ( c ) it is led, though not monopolize, by the intellectuals and intelligentsias of the community, who are inspired by the local dynamics and able to think in an autonomous fashion, without pressure of dictation or imitation from exogenous forces and trends; ( d ) it is elastic and spontaneous in nature, meaning that it is not stuck with a particular regime of truth, inasmuch averting hair-splitting polemics that only diverted real concerns; ( e ) it has a sustained platform or receptacle in which the engagement can be expressed and made known to the larger public; ( f ) it brings together concerned members of the community, from various sectors, to come together in a dialogue to speak up, to recommend, to share their experiences and to motivate each others.

Theoretically social engagement could cover every domain of the community life. But here a caution is necessary. We must be careful that it should not be part of the euphoria of trivialization; (an euphoria that beset many consumer and information societies) nor by the superfluousness of the romantics. In other words, the engagement site and the participants must be focused with issues of vital importance of the community, rather than to be enticed by seasonal polemics, moralistic controversies and the like. While we can agree that social engagement itself must take up against these superfluous issues, we must always be careful that the agenda for community building should not be distracted.

The *craft* of social engagement requires the imagination, the will power, knowledge, stamina, skill, dedication, commitment and consistency. This in turn requires a long term cultivation and enhancement. What can be observed generally is the fact that we do have social engagement but one that is characterized as euphorically or seasonally motivated, due to certain efforts to concur certain events and called by prominent leadership, rather than one that is emerged out of commitment, conviction and sense of urgencies. Social engagement is not simply discoursing of ideas. It is more than that, even though discoursing of ideas is an important component in the process of social engagement. But to engage in an ideational realm is not simply to convey or consume the ideas, but to react to, create, recreate of new ideas. It is also not a deposition or assertion.

## Constituents of Discerning Social Engagement

In social engagement, we must have the **moral and intellectual courage**, and stamina to persistently confront the types of thinking that become destructive to community building, that is, those that immobilize confidence, hurt the self-respect and dignity, and infuse erroneous ideas into the thought on the community's modernization and developmental process. Put simply, it questions the dehumanized and prejudicial notions that are associated with the community, or those directed at them. As such it requires a sound intellectual and cultural basis, without falling into an immobile position of formalistic academicism especially in the context of the anxiety for global ranking. Social engagement cannot afford to imitate frenzy academicism, as its audience is not abstract international journals and forums.

Social engagement is best seen as a **sustained process** rather than deliverable products. It involves the participation of key circles of the community, its stake holders, interest groups, while enticing and inviting new ones into this process of engagement. To be a truly an engagement, it should never be maintained by an exclusive group, for narcissistic complex will impair its vitality. Nor it should be elitist in its tenor, concern and demeanor, yet without the need to go populist. The valuational drive of the engagement is never for academic sake, but one that takes the nuances of the universal and the particular seriously, averting any form of group insularity and parochiality. Social engagement must be site where participation is inclusive, emancipative, enlightening the members of the community towards the goal of building a progressive community.

For social engagement to be truly effective, it must be **communicative** inasmuch as it is dialectically deliberated among its proponents and participants. By communicative we refer to the accessibility and dissemination of the things deliberated in the engagement to the larger public or community so as to benefit from it. An engagement that is inclusive, not in terms of this topical coverage, but also in terms of its sector participants and the sites which it operates.<sup>7</sup> The meaningful communication between various sectors of society; between civil society and State; between adult and youth requires a democratic form of communication (as opposed to an authoritarian ones).<sup>8</sup> Overall the mission of engagement is to bring about a democratic form of communication, which facilitates engagement in an open and non-hierarchical manner.

7 This reminds us of what Raymond Williams speaks of the democratic mode of communication in a community. Read, "Communications and Community," in *Resources of Hope*. (London: Verso, 1989).

8 The democratic communication constitutes "maximum participation by the individuals in the society. Since communication is the record of human growth, it has to be varied. It has to be disperse itself into many different and independent systems, all of which, however, have to be secure enough to maintain themselves. It has to get rid of the idea that communication is the business of a minority talking to, instructing, leading on, the majority." *Ibid.*, p. 29

## Harnessing the Resources for Engagement

While we say that social engagement is inclusive, this does not mean it is frivolously opened to all sort of things with the consequence of leveling down of the discourse. Here the role of the intellectuals and the experts are imperative in engagement.<sup>9</sup> These two groups, as agent of change, must (re)direct the engagement into a productive one. They are not only instrumental in setting and harnessing the agenda and issues in the engagement, but provide the intellectual-ethical direction, such that, in the explication of the engagement, for instance, points to the imperative of *moral reasoning*, rather than *racial reasoning*, which only brings us to the abyss of prejudice and moral confusion; yet at the same time not denying that ethnic dimension in unraveling certain analysis is as important as gender and class dimensions. Here combining the best of the available critical scholarship in the academia, and the realities and urgencies of the present in the community becomes imperative.<sup>10</sup>

A community of engagement with conscience is fundamental in community building with the aim to ensure communitarian empathy, intellectual receptivity, ethical rigour and emotional stability. When we say “intellectual” we do not mean to say the highbrow academic intellectualism, but one where the concept entails, in the words of Cornel West, the will “to speak a truth that allows suffering to speak.” West continues:

“That is, it creates a vision of the world that puts into the limelight the social misery that is usually hidden or concealed by the dominant viewpoints of a society. “Intellectual” in that sense simply means those who are willing to reflect critically upon themselves as well as upon the larger society and to ascertain whether there is some possibility of amelioration and betterment.”<sup>11</sup>

Such commitment requires a moral-ethical basis and this is where the religious tradition of the society can provide. Religious tradition provide us the sound universal values we need, but an analytical tool must be acquired and developed in order for us to fully appreciate those values; those that can be directed for our community well being. The courage to deliberate and participate in social engagement is part of the socio-cultural and political courage. Again West’s reflection on this point is relevant, especially for us who committed for this community building where a dehumanized and distressed condition is one of our aim to address:

“If you’re fundamentally committed to dealing with the suffering and pain, you will be willing to put yourself through some processes. One sign of commitment, for me, is always the degree to which one is willing to be self-critical and self-questioning, because that’s a sign that you’re serious about generating the conditions for the possibility of overcoming the suffering that you’re after. Commitment is fundamentally about focusing on the suffering and trying to

<sup>9</sup> Here its apt to draw the distinction between the intellectuals and the experts as made by Cornel West. He opines: “The experts – the analyst and the academic – performs the kind of careful, cautious scholarship that needs to be done. The intellectual is somebody else. An intellectual is someone who builds on specialized work to give people a sense of the whole, an overview.” Cornel West, “Affirmation,” *Transition*, Issue 68, 1995, p. 68

<sup>10</sup> Thus Cornel West writes: “to be an engaged progressive intellectual is to be a critical organic catalyst whose vocation is to fuse the best of the life of the mind from within the academy with the best of the organized forces for greater democracy and freedom from outside the academy.” *Keeping Faith: philosophy and race in America*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 103

<sup>11</sup> West, *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 551

overcome it, trying to understand where it comes from, its causes, its effects. At the same time, it is about trying to prepare oneself to sacrifice and to serve in such a way that one attempts to overcome the suffering.”<sup>12</sup>

In engaging, we are actually looking together for the best recipe to heal and address the undernourishment in various realms of our social, cultural and economic life. In the process of engagement, we assume the educative role, with intellectual resources to shape and give meaning to the engagement. The educative approach has its purpose; to propose and to bring forth ideas deemed as important for the society and individual. However, it must be cautioned that in such engagement, there can be authoritarian ways of engagement as opposed to a more humanistic approach.

## The Challenges of Engagement

While it is easier to enumerate what constitute a social engagement, the challenge to fully define it is to see what are some of the practices that hampering it. For example, social engagement when initiated by an organization could face a hindrance, such as the interference of the executive or board members on the research wing spearheading the thinking circle in the organization. As a result, we see the tendency of anti-intellectualism at work in many of community organizations. This can be attested by the fact that it is so difficult for us to name one credible research or intellectual wing in our community organizations. Thus when a particular research is required to be embarked by these organizations, it is not uncommon that the executive level just farm out researching works to others, with no motivation to develop its own capacity from within.

The challenge today is the fact that we have types of engagement characterized by ( a ) the ceremonial type where “engagement” made in lavish forums, yet its cerebral quality is very much to be desired; ( b ) the formalistic type where the agenda of research are predictable themes, with bureaucratic thinking predominate; ( c ) the seasonal type where engagement follows the periodical trend and fads in academic or media, and ( d ) the motive-driven type, where engagement is insurrected when there is high profile events organized, and where the “engagement” ends the very moment the events ended.

Another dimension where engagement becomes inhibitive is the culture of corporatism. Professionalism in running an efficient organization is definitely desirable and important, but to imitate the very corporate culture when we deal in the realms of community building is a misplaced one.<sup>13</sup> If we simply treat our targeted groups as deliverables that are computed into our KPI and organizational profile, this is where the commitment for engagement becomes questionable. Simply put, the community leadership, equipped only with bureaucratic organizational skills, often imitating those in corporate culture. This will inevitably shut the door to other important ingredients for social engagement. This anti-intellectualism has serious effects on building a thinking capacity of its members, and to the larger society in general.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 409

<sup>13</sup> “It makes it very difficult to hold on to nonmarket values, such as commitment in relationship, solidarity, community, care, sacrifice, risk and struggle. Market values encourage a preoccupation with the now, with the immediate.” *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 295

<sup>14</sup> Read, Azhar Ibrahim, “Anti-Intellectualism - The Predicament of Our Time,” *The Muslim Reader*, Vol.22, No. 3, Sept-Dec, 2004.

## Addressing Bureaucratic Formalism/Humiliation

There are many topics of importance that can be taken up in our social engagement. The latter should not be seen as a purely in the domain of discoursing of ideas. It should encapsulate practical day to day dealing with the community or group which we have taken the task to oversee or having the interest to ensure their well-being. Here we would like to bring attention to the bureaucratic approach in dealing our targeted groups, or in the current language is known as “clientele.” Avisha Margalit in his perceptive discussion on the idea of decent society, raised an important question: Does bureaucracy contains humiliating elements? In our contexts, the bureaucracy may not necessarily referring to the government departments, but also to our MMOs whose operation and work scheme is bureaucratic in form and spirit:

“One complaint constantly reiterated against all bureaucracies involves its mechanistic quality... based on impersonal relations, and so they are indifferent to individuals and their suffering and remote from their individuality and uniqueness. This impersonal attitude often becomes an inhuman attitude. “To bureaucrats people are just numbers” or “Clerks only see the application forms and not the people behind them” are familiar expressions of this sort of criticism. That is, bureaucracies are accused of seeing human beings as nonhuman – as numbers, or forms, or “cases.” This attitude of seeing persons in a machinelike manner is humiliating in its very essence.”<sup>15</sup>

He continues,

“A person may feel insulted by the very request to fill out forms in which he has to fit himself into neutral categories and do not convey anything of what is precious about him, and he may experience it as being treated as a number [or as application forms]”<sup>16</sup>

In the face of abject urban poverty, our bureaucratic style in dealing with our “client” (obviously borrowed from a market jargon), only humiliates them. Have we give serious thought on this group ; not just to alleviate their suffering, but to minimize their humiliation in their experience dealing with them? Through engagement , we can deliberate on this point clearly and firmly.

Of course it would be unfair to say that all MMOs operate as such, but in cases where there are such practices, this must be addressed. Engaging this issue becomes a focal point to minimize humiliating experiences of those who are in need of our support and help. Thus far, have we really deal with this question openly? I do not pretend to have the answer, but it is not uncommon to hear amongst some activists and social workers remarks such as “that those who are asking for help are not really deserving ones”, since they observed that “they have big TV set at home” or “their homes are well furnished,” or “the husband is not working” and the like. This issue needs to be engaged discerningly so that our social workers and activists

<sup>15</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 215

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219

are made aware that such attitude could perhaps an outcome of an underlying tendencies to blame the victim, an easy way out to explain a complex phenomenon which we have not fully explore and diagnose it exhaustively.

## Organizational Euphoria and Thinking Inertia

Thinking inertia in the midst of corporate organization and euphoria beset many of us in developing a thinking culture and spirit. Here we do not mean to say that organizational techniques as unimportant. However, it is meant to point out that in the process of running the organization, an overemphasis on organizational techniques may lead to the primary mission of the organization established to be relegated. This can be seen in a number of ways. For example, we may find that we are active to send staff for training in meticulous office skills (perhaps because there are ready service providers) – yet we are timid to send staff for updates on community issues and development. We get excited and readily want to initiate publications, and seminars, and often for our organizational profiling; publication with glossy editions, yet its distribution becomes rather limited as it turned into coffee table books, reports and occasional series (often in a language medium that could not address the community’s heartlanders). While, these initiatives are of course commendable, how do we place them as part in enhancing community building, rather than institutional showcasing.

Then, we are easily enamored by *tendering out* consultancies, soliciting a battery of foreign consultants, which is deemed to increase the profile of our projects, although honestly, we rarely check as to how much they know about our community’s dynamics, much less our history, and reading our problems with empathy. Perhaps the most obvious, in relation to building the thinking capacity amongst us, is the in-house training and readings which is rare, and even if existed, it is relegated primarily to the research department. Such activities are often seen as intellectualistic, and therefore not necessary. The organizational executive mantra is “less speculation/deliberation, but direct action.” This state of thinking must be corrected, if not challenged as it puts a serious setback to the thinking capacity within the community. The executive or board running the organization are of the more professionalized type, but as observed by many social scientists, have a preponderance of a non-thinking type, or worst non-diagnostic type, amongst them.<sup>17</sup>

## Adult-Youth Nexus

The present demographic profile in our community shows a large proportion of youth population, and this calls for our better preparedness to give substantive space for their growth. As Mannheim eloquently wrote: “Youth is an important part of latent reserves which are present in every epoch. It depends on the social structure whether these reserves, and which of them, if any, are mobilized and integrated into a function.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Read, Hans-Dieter Evers, “The Role of Professionals in Social and Political Change,” in Peter S.J. Chen [and] Hans-Dieter Evers (eds.) *Studies in ASEAN sociology: urban society and social change*. (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978)

<sup>18</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time*. (London: Routledge & Paul, 1966), p. 36



To harness and develop this group must naturally be in our full stride and commitment. To simply recognize them by enchoing the lofty ideals of “*pemuda harapan bangsa*” is no longer suffice, but must be translated into concrete actions. It will only be a cliché if we only keep on saying the repeated slogans and clamour for our youth to be “conscious”, “take the lead”, “to be proactive”, and the like.

The key words for engaging the youth is one that there is truly dialogic space and recognition of the roles to be entrusted on both adults and youths. It is not a dictation but engagement of two groups which enable both to communicate their aspirations, concerns, and frustrations. The domains for this adult-youth nexus are the school, family and community. The role of school in developing the youth-adult engagement has been identified by many, although this must not be overemphasized as the role of family structure and the community as a whole is equally vital. Schools, as one scholar noted, “must become the learning field and communication sphere for all forces that stand for the responsibility for the development of the child’s personality in society. The school must become a significant node in the network of society from which the responsibility for the child is organized.”<sup>19</sup> In our engagement, to bring about a meaningful adult-youth nexus, we must recognize the role to be played by school, family and community, as succinctly put forward below:

“But preparation for social responsibility – preparation that can not only help individuals resist the destructive impulses in society but also empower them to accept the obligation to do so – is not a task that should be reserved for parents alone. It is a **community responsibility**. In this context we suggest that the school – the social institution that alone commands attendance for a sustained length of time – can play a particularly important role. Schools need to become institutions that not only prepare students for academic competence but also help them to acquire an extensive orientation to others. Schools need to become caring institutions – institutions in which students, teachers, bus drivers, principals, and all others receive positive affirmation for kindness, empathy, and concern.”<sup>20</sup>

## The Nexus as Reciprocal Socialisation

The significance of this adult-youth nexus resonates in humanistic psychology where the concept *reciprocal socialization* is identified in the parent-child interaction, and by that extension, the adult-youth dimension. According to one writer, “This concept would encourage that parents should be open to change and, in fact, socialized by their children instead of perceiving their role solely in terms of responsibility for the socialization of their children.”<sup>21</sup> Often the school system has coloured the adult-children/youth relationship and experiences, and the limitations it imposed must be noted. This calls for our serious to think of the need of multi-dimensional flow of experience in the adult-youth nexus that we ideally imagined:

<sup>19</sup> Udo Schmalzle, “The Importance of Schools and Families for the Identity Formation of Children and Adolescents,” *International Journal of Education and Religion*, II, 1, 2001, p. 31

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 40

<sup>21</sup> Willard B. Frick, *Humanistic Psychology: Interviews with Maslow, Murphy, and Rogers*. (Ohio: Chales E Merrill Publishing, 1971), p.5

“New perspectives on role relationship and interpersonal experience must evolve that will redefine these rigid, structured relationships that depend upon the domination and imposition of one person’s perceptions and experience upon another’s. Parent-child, child-adult, husband-wife, male-female, teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, patient-therapist, black-white, and perhaps others, are all in need of liberation from the rigid role of definitions that encourage and support the intimidation of experience. The denial of experience is perhaps the most basic level of human rejection for it is a denial of the human composition and the most intimate aspects of the evolving self-structure. To confirm another person, to support and authenticate his worth, is achieved at a deep level of shared interaction and experience, and leads to an expanding of self and others.”<sup>22</sup>

A paternalistic one-way monologue or admonition, where the adults simply tell the youths what are best for them could no longer work, nor effective in nurturing their mind. Paternalism has characterized in a number of ways in our socialization. When we have been treated in a paternalistic fashion, it is not uncommon that we behave similarly to those whom we supposed to be caring and concerning. Paternalistic pattern of relationship, though may work at certain point of history, has great limitation in the context of today’s complex changes and challenges which requires a new way of engagement and approach.

Herein lies the importance of recognizing youth as encompassing group, where their presence and potential efficacy is acknowledged. When we recognize the partner of dialogues, say with the youth circle or cohort, we should always avoid seeing them as needing some guidance, epistolary admonition and discipline. Simply echoing and insisting moralism will not work. To engage with them is meant to see that both sides (youth and adult) have equal responsibilities, and that their voice and vision matters in re-making of the community. However, if we want to engage the youth *only* for our organizational or personal profiling, than such adult-youth nexus of engagement can never succeed, as the efforts can never be a truly sustained one, nor we are addressing real issues at hand. To put in a more provocative way, we have seen this, as attested by the various projects pronounced earlier whose outcome leads to nowhere, and the much publicized initiatives only to be remembered in the chronicles of community events and organizations.

But what in the case where the adults themselves lacks the vitality, become jaded and trapped in the abyss of hopelessness? Yet we adults complain easily that youths today lack the aspiration, commitment or simply “lost”. To simply dismiss them, and therefore justifying our paternalistic approach in dealing with them thus become the norm. Instead it calls for our discerning empathy and criticality of the challenges confronted by our youth (and adults too) where it posed the very problems in community building. The observation on the effect of consumerist capitalism by Cornel West on this point is apt and deserves to be highlighted. While he noted the potential of the youths to take up a vital role in society, they are confronted by an incessant distraction from the consumer market structures, as much as the adults do:



“...one of the most effective strategies of corporate marketers has been to target the youth market with distractive amusement and saturate them with pleasurable sedatives that steer them away from engagement with issues of peace and justice. The incessant media bombardment of images (of salacious bodies and mindless violence) on TV and in movies and music convinces many young people that the culture of gratification – a quest for insatiable pleasures, endless titillation, and sexual stimulation – is the only way of being human. Hedonistic values and narcissistic identities produce emotionally stunted young people unable to grow up and unwilling to be responsible democratic citizens. The market-driven media lead many young people to think that life is basically about material toys and social status... The media bombardment not only robs young people of their right to struggle for maturity – by glamorizing possessive individualism at the expense of democratic individuality – but also leaves them ill equipped to deal with spiritual malnutrition that awaits after their endless pursuit of pleasure.”<sup>23</sup>

A conscientised generation can only be developed if we have nurtured substantively the adult-youth nexus into an engaging culture which will enable both groups to make sense of their conditions and predicaments, yet affirming their ability and potentiality to confront those challenges. To empower the young means to give them the opportunity to lead; give them space, and instilling a sense of concrete hope, self-love to combat nihilism and hopelessness. Empowerment means recognizing and legitimizing their unique contribution to the community. To give our youths a sense of hope means telling them “You are loved” and we truly care of their well being, future and present predicament.

The engagement is a learning process where the ideals of democratic culture and personality, civic courage, commitment to cooperation, are infused via the act and thinking. In communication, with mutual respect and civility, infuses the ethos of solidarity, cooperation and inclusivity. The resources of engagement can be found from the democratic ideals that we cherished as citizens – values of plurality, tolerance, cooperation, justice, equality and the like. In the process engagement we should hope for the emergent of a more progressive voices and circles in our midst. Issues of important urgencies, rendered as invisible or dealt with ambivalently, not just by the dominant discourse, but also by ourselves, must be addressed accordingly, with ethical integrity and moral courage. Ambivalence, hopelessness, persisting myth of culture deficit and its dysfunctional effect on families, must be scrutinized in social engagement.

Social engagement is not on the realms of speculation nor moralistic fervour, but one where concrete issues as confronted by the community, and future problems and trends are debated and deliberated. Problem-posing slant in the engagement is vital to unravel the issues of importance to the community. This problem-posing is to be distinguished from the dominant approach of problem-solving. Problem-posing is diagnostic and on-going in its enquiry and engagement on the issues of the day, alongside thinking of possible alternatives, whereas its opposite is the problem-solving type of thinking where solutions are found and readily to be implemented.

At present we need various platforms for engagement. We need a more stable, sustained site, for instance such a serious community journal that can become a reference point in our engagement, so that it can reach out to the wider community, at a level accessible for many without high brow academic parlance, yet suffice to encapsulate rigorous discussions and reflections. The site of engagement is called social as it operates beyond the campus community, although academics too can perform the intellectual leadership in leading and taking part in the engagement. The significance of the social site is not only that it opens the access of engagement wider, but it mitigates the jargon ridden academic analyses that often lack emphatic tenor, apart from resurrecting the established positions. But being in the social/public sphere, the site also (like in the academic realm) susceptible to the Ortegian mass man type whose substandard ideas and insularity saps the intellectual creativity, and bringing about the leveling down of ideals and standard.<sup>24</sup>

In social engagement, we embark in critically questioning the current wisdom in policy implementations; in challenging the dominating myths and simplifications; in presenting alternatives ideas and approaches for addressing problems of the community. The evasion of engagement and dialogue means continuing the grip of dominative narratives that devoid of emancipative ideas apart from circumscribing the feeling of individual and community pride that is vital in the face of nihilism, self-depreciation and pessimism.

The act of engagement calls for a wider participation of the concerned citizens to take part in engaging with issues or policies that are affecting their life and others. A conscientised generation is created in this process of creative and critical engagement. A progressive social engagement, introducing or floating ideas is instrumental in discoursing about the community, namely critical concepts, idioms and perspectives about society, individuality and humanity.<sup>25</sup> It also demands accountability of the community and political leadership. It must interrogate those perspectives that downplay structural analyses inasmuch as it scrutinizes the behaviorist prejudicial positions that are not uncommon in dominant narratives.

## Initiating Culture Circle

Looking at the bright side, we have for the past decades, develop the craft of social engagement, and only discerning practitioners know how far we have gone so far, or which areas we yet to be explored fully. We have various forms of social engagement, and today's forum can be seen as one of the main platform for engagement. However much more can be done to enhance engagement and planning a vision to nurture it is imperative. One area that can be explored is the formation of culture circle. The culture circle is a site where critical consciousness is nurtured and experimented, and where possible alternatives are imagined. To be conscious of the effects of the dominant ideology and practices, to infuse a sense of dignity via empowerment, and the cultivation of a collective, democratic and cooperative spirit, the need of cultivating culture circle amongst our youth is therefore imperative. This cultural circle is not a special organization or body, but is a site where dialogue, criticality, empowerment and sense of hope are infused. It is a site where dominant myths that deform us are problematised and alternative paradigms are suggested and evaluated.

<sup>24</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The revolt of the masses*. (New York: Norton, 1932)

<sup>25</sup> For example, the efficacy of the concept of *nihilism*, which has been introduced in Black progressive discourse, is one example of social engagement that question the limitations of the structuralist position, inasmuch as the prejudiced position of the conservative behaviorist. Read Cornel West, *Race Matters*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2001)



## Culture Circle as Site for Illumination

Ideally our school environment should already prepare our young to dialogue between them and the educator in school, as well as members of the community in their surrounding, including their immediate family. Critical learning, exchanges and dialogues make the culture circle a site where the illumination of the reality becomes center stage, while the domination in the real world made known and scrutinised. A summary on the scope of culture circle is useful here:

”A cultural circle is not an abstract reality that we can rationally define. It is rather the result of a whole critical learning process, intimately linked to the social reality in which the group with which one wants to work lives. Speaking of cultural circles means at the same time speaking of dialogue, animator, education, and politics... The cultural circle...in which we discuss problems that in one way or another concern the inhabitants of a certain region. It is a different school, in which there are neither teachers nor pupils – a place where there are no lessons taught, as in traditional schools. The culture circle is not a knowledge distribution centre, in which the students are supposed to learn by heart what the teacher ”serves” them. It is a place (near a tree, in a small room of a house or a factory) where group of persons meet in order to discuss their everyday life, and the problems connected to it, such as: their work, local or national events, their family life. This practical life is represented in codifications, and analysed in order to gain deeper and more critical insight, enabling the people to translate the critical view gained into action... a cultural circle is a place where men and women have a right and an obligation to express freely what they think and how they live their daily reality, and where one cannot imagine the kind of repressive silence designed to keep the popular masses ignorant.”<sup>26</sup>

But if we extend the culture circle outside the school environment and situate it in community/social educational initiatives, the culture circle can still have a vital role to play, or even becomes so important especially when the school system has given no place or recognition for the culture circle to emerge. In Freirean critical pedagogy, the essential constituents of culture circle are: (a) the raising of generative themes; ( b ) the problem-posing approach in dealing with the themes compiled; ( c ) the engagement in dialogue with divergent groups; ( d ) analysing and suggesting solutions to the problem raised, and ( e ) carrying the actions at personal and/or societal level.<sup>27</sup> In sum, the culture circle ”must permit the development of the intellectual capacities of the people.”<sup>28</sup>

Speaking of culture circle as a discursive site brings us to a point to reflect critically as to whether we have provided ideational space (as discursive site) or even physical space for engagement activities to take

<sup>26</sup> Hilda and Miguel Escobar, *Dialogue in the Pedagogical Praxis of Paulo Freire*, (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1981), pp. 8-9

<sup>27</sup> Read, Mariana Souto-Manning, *Freire, teaching, and learning: culture circles across contexts*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2010)

<sup>28</sup> Hilda and Miguel Escobar, *Dialogue in the Pedagogical Praxis of Paulo Freire*, p.34

place. We may have libraries and meeting rooms within our community institutions and organisations, but do we have a space where it becomes possible for exchanges, forums, debates can take place, plus a viable receptacle (such as journals) to document these exchanges and debates. To Freire, culture circles are "spaces where teaching and learning took place in dialogic fashion... spaces for knowledge, for knowing, not for knowledge transference; places where knowledge was produced, not simply presented to or imposed on learner...spaces where new hypotheses for reading the world were created." <sup>29</sup>

## Dialogue in Culture Circle

Without going into details of this Freirean method, we shall only focus on the aspect of dialogue which we think youth and adults can undertake to ensure serious communication and engagement between them. In the culture circles, dialogues open communication, inasmuch as it can pose a challenge to the present domination. Freire's view on the meaning and purpose of dialogue is relevant here:

"dialogue must be understood as something taking part in the very historical nature of human beings. It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. That is, dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where human reflects on their reality as they make and remake it.... To the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able *to know that we know*, which is something *more* than just knowing... On the other hand, we know that we know, and we human beings know also that *we don't know*. Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality." <sup>30</sup>

Through dialogue we can "take agentive roles and transform their own realities." <sup>31</sup> Dialogue in culture circle enhances the critical understanding of the participant; be wary of the challenges around them, and be committed to suggest a way out after a sound and substantive analysis and diagnosis. "Through dialogue, we build and change the world. Through dialogue, culture circle participants can challenge beliefs and realities commonly perceived as static... participants can challenge socioculturally and historically constructed oppressions... Through a variety of topics which are connected to their very lives, participants engage in posing problems, dialoguing, and deriving some possible solutions and responses in individual and societal realms." <sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Paulo Freire, *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work*. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 121

<sup>30</sup> Ira Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), pp. 98-99

<sup>31</sup> Souto-Manning, *Freire, teaching, and learning: culture circles across contexts*, p.39

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32



The participation and engagement of youths with adult in culture circle is one where dialogue is made possible, where both can learn, unlearn and relearn from each other. Adult, having more resources and experiences, can share and guide without imposing. Only with such dialogues we can ensure the process of maturity and sensibility amongst our youth, listening to their anxieties and frustations, and channelling their potentials into self-realisation at individual and societal level. And this self-reliasation can only be possible if we provide a milieu of empowerment, creativity and criticality.

Indeed we have devised many top-down approaches, yet we are rather timid to try out bottom up empowerment initiative due to our very much bureaucratic and technocratic approach in dealing with things. As a result, we continuously heard the various youth's conventions with almost repetitive proclaimed visions and goals for youth, yet we see little empowerment done in the sense it works organically from the grassroots where the youths take the main initiatives. If this approach continues, youth's empowerment remains illusive inasmuch as we fail to garner the potentials of our younger generation to be part of this transformative process of community-and nation-building. Moreover, it is constantly repeated that we need to make our young to think better. But the point here, as Freire has rightly points out: "Our task is not to teach students to think – they can already think; but to exchange our ways of thinking with each other and look together for better ways of approaching the decodification of an object."<sup>33</sup> This brings exactly to our point that the dialogic initiatives between our youth and adult are imperative.

## Engagement for Empowerment

We need to nurture and groom the liberatory impulse amongst youths. The age of paternalistic tendency of domesticating youth still persists (or must be ended). The time of empowering them in the next stage of social transformation and resistance against inhibitive practices and ideologies is therefore crucial. Adults cannot simply hand over what transformative thought to the young, just as no revolutionary populist can simply hand over freedom to the masses. (just like in Freire's thought that educator can never empower the student, except by providing the situation where the student can empower themselves in the process of learning.) The young must be part in the process of fighting for and experience the process of the desired transformation. A genuine empowerment averts paternalism as the latter can never lead to the real growth and maturity towards liberation, but often end up in domination. Through empowerment we could a check on hopelessness where the motivational drive is dampened, and thus easily succumb to surrendering our fate to a dehumanized condition.<sup>34</sup>

33 cited in Lesley Bartlett, p. 37

34 As West puts it very well: "And when you have motivational structures breaking down, you usually don't have an encouraging environment. Or persons are convinced that the work that they are doing supposed to be doing will not lead to something better. And right now the larger the crisis in the environment – which is partly economic and political and personal, as I said before – makes it difficult for persons to be motivated enough to think that this kind of energy exerted would generate the kind of results that they want. Cornel West, *Restoring Hope: conversations on the future of Black America*. Edited by Kelvin Shawn Sealey. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 204-5

But the former is not something that can be attained by grace, but via discursive dialogues. The stamina for *dialogic struggle* must be present, and this requires a sense of historical mission as well as the calling to fulfill one's responsibility to the larger society. Thus our youths' spirit for the collective endeavour must be re-invigorated, and to understand the meaning of struggle becomes imperative. Moreover, the vocation of youth is not something that we (adult) should simply declare or stipulate for them. If there is no vocation on the part of the adults to be partners of dialogue with the young, the latter have very little source for guidance and role model. And soon they will be more conditioned by the mass media, especially in this milieu of hyper gadgetry, than they are connected with their community, family, neighbourhood and even their parents. The failure of adults to fill this role would mean a more complicating challenge ahead of us.

### **Youth towards Conscientised Generation**

The current paradigm of youth and community development is essentially one that advocates an individualised response – that if we have good attitude and values and change our mindset, or if we have good achievement oriented motivations, then all will be in the right track. This individualised approach that conditions us to accept the existing status quo and work within in the system, while questioning the fundamentals are invariably seen as disruptive and unproductive. To put in another way, the dominant approach in community development is one of a conservative type, albeit the liberative and empowering lingo that it regularly incorporated in its repertoire of development pronouncement.

In as much as we are zealous in our call for youths' transformation, we must be equally humble and critical to look at the current youth and community development initiatives. In other words, there is a need to look into the limitations of the *bureaucratic or administrative approach* to community/youth development initiatives that have been carried out. In this approach, contrary to empowerment approach, the needs of the community/youth are formulated in a rather paternalistic way, with the ideas that the experts, planners and administrators can think better for the community and youth. Often in this approach, the failure to consult the community itself, listening to their problems and taking their suggestions seriously, is a classic example of a paternalistic bureaucratic mind, which after ignoring the perceptions of the local people, will in the end, it demand the local community to be responsible in solving their problems.

Last but not least, in our local parlance, we identified the conscientised generation as one of *generasi berkepedulian*. The term *peduli* entails the consciousness and concern for the individuals and members of the community; taking side with those who are in need most, and with empathy of the situation and predicament, spurs us to action. The craft of social engagement is crucial so that we can weave in critical and emancipative ideas into the fabric of our community life. There is no magical formula to attain it except to sharpen and refine our craft of engagement along the way, equipping ourselves with basic skills, techniques, aesthetics,

imagination, will and sensitivity to the fast changing conditions that we are confronted today. Central in the conscientized generation is the fact that the process of conscientization nurtures and strengthens in breadth and depth, substantively amongst its members. Freire's reflection on this subject brings us to the end of this discussion, as the points that he highlights bears apt correlation of what we have discussed earlier:

“A person who has reached conscientization is capable of clearly perceiving hunger as more than just not eating; as the manifestation of a political, economic, and social reality of deep injustice. If that person believes in God and prays, his or her prayer will certainly focus on asking for the strength to fight against the deprivation of dignity to which he or she is subjected. The person who has reached conscientization and is also a believer in God sees God as a presence in history, but not one that makes history in lieu of men and women's actions. In fact, it is up to us to make history and to be made and remade by it... The person who has reached conscientization is able to connect facts and problems... A person who has reached conscientization has a different understanding of history and of his or her role in it. He or she will refuse to become stagnant, but will move and mobilize to change the world. He or she knows that it is possible to change the world, but impossible without the mobilization of the dominated...”<sup>35</sup>

## Bibliography

- Azhar Ibrahim, "Anti-Intellectualism - The Predicament of Our Time," *The Muslim Reader*, Vol.22, No. 3, Sept-Dec, 2004.
- Escobar, Hilda and Miguel. *Dialogue in the Pedagogical Praxis of Paulo Freire*, Tokyo: United Nations University, 1981.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter "The Role of Professionals in Social and Political Change," in Peter S.J. Chen [and] Hans-Dieter Evers (eds.) *Studies in ASEAN sociology: urban society and social change*. Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978.
- Freire, Paulo. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.
- Freire, Paulo. *The Politics of Education: culture, power, and liberation*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985.
- Freire, Paulo. *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Frick, Willard B. *Humanistic Psychology: Interviews with Maslow, Murphy, and Rogers*. Ohio: Chales E Merrill Publishing, 1971.
- Mannheim, Karl. *Diagnosis of Our Time*. London: Routledge & Paul, 1966.
- Margalit, Avishai. *The Decent Society*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Ortega, Jose y Gasset, *The revolt of the masses*. New York: Norton, 1932.
- Schmalzle, Udo. "The Importance of Schools and Families for the Identity Formation of Children and Adolescents," *International Journal of Education and Religion*, II, 1, 2001.
- Shor, Ira and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1987.
- Souto-Manning, Mariana. *Freire, teaching, and learning: culture circles across contexts*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Suriani Suratman, "Problematic Singapore Malays": the making of a portrayal. Occasional Paper. Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2005.
- West, Cornel. *The Cornel West Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas, 1999.
- West, Cornel. "Affirmation," *Transition*, Issue 68, 1995.
- West, Cornel. *Keeping Faith: philosophy and race in America*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- West, Cornel. "The Necessary Engagement with Youth Culture," in *Democracy Matters*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- West, Cornel. *Restoring Hope: conversations on the future of Black America*. Edited by Kelvin Shawn Sealey. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Williams, Raymond. *Resources of Hope*. London: Verso, 1989.

