

Teenage moms light up, empower Tondo slums

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A RAMON Magsaysay laureate recognized in 2011 for bringing solar energy to the poor of India was a recent visitor to the Philippines, throwing light on how power coming from the sun can empower slum communities.



Harish Hande, the founder of Solar Electric Light Company social enterprise in India, visited various projects of Philippine-based nongovernment organizations like the Life Project for Youth in Manila and the Foundation of Our Lady of Peace Mission in Parañaque on Thursday.

Hande, who brought along

his team, went to observe the solar service station (3S) in the slum community of Sitio Damayan in Tondo, to assess the possibility of collaborative projects.

Teenage mothers

The young mothers of Sitio Damayan help run the center, which operates out of a converted container where about 500 solar lamps are being recharged for the use of the community's households.

The center is being supervised by the Life Project for Youth (LP4Y), a French-assisted organization helping young adults aged 17 to 24 living in extreme poverty. Similar centers operate in Calauan, Laguna, and parts of Vietnam and Indonesia.

The teenage mothers manning the centers receive P200 per day in compensation. LP4Y takes P150 from each mother to deposit in their savings accounts.

"I was enticed by the organization's invitation because they have been giving us work and the opportunity to finish our studies," said Bernadette Moralita, 18, the mother of a 2-year-old. Moralita managed to finish only first year high school.

Energy, livelihood

Brigitte Valton, a member of LP4Y, said the project's aim was to give the young mothers of Sitio Damayan a livelihood, apart from giving them access to cheap and clean source of energy.

For P8 a day, anyone can borrow the solar-powered lamp for their own use. The lamp has to be returned the next day, or the borrower will have to pay another P8.

On weekdays, the mothers work at the center in the morning, leaving their children in the care of the nursery that has been put up at the center by LP4Y.

Irish Jane Soberano, 18, leaves her 8-month-old baby at the nursery at 7 a.m. so she can go to work at the solar station.

From 12 noon to 4 p.m., the young mothers go to alternative learning classes accredited by the Department of Education.

The solar energy initiative in the Sitio Damayan slum community is really small when compared to what Hande's group has achieved in India.

Selco story

Hande related how Selco, which he founded in Bangalore 20 years ago, expanded to a for-profit social enterprise serving 200,000 customers in the poorest communities of India.

Selco runs 45 energy service centers, employing a workforce of more than 370. By switching from kerosene lamps to solar, families and businesses in India were able to save on fuel expenses, creating much safer and healthier households.

Workers and vendors are able to work and students to study at night with solar energy.

'Inclusive' profits

"Our philosophy is to create an institution [that] is financially, socially and environmentally sustainable," Hande told a forum attended by organizations engaged in solar projects in the Philippines, explaining how Selco has thrived in the past 20 years.

While the poor pay for the value of Selco's services, the organization makes sure that the profit remains "inclusive," Hande said.

"We should look at them not as a market or as beneficiaries but as partners," he said.

Asked how he could help the Philippines, Hande said he would like to create models for multiple enterprises like LP4Y in other parts of the country.

According to the organizers of Hande's visit, Selco is considering partnerships and replicating its innovative model in the Philippines.

"We thought we could create applicable models that can be done today and not tomorrow," Hande said.