

Common Problems, Diverse Solutions: Emergent Themes and Reflections from ALFP 2015

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Introduction

Gloria Steinem once said “success is completing the full circle of yourself.” It feels apropos to revisit the general theme of the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) 2015 “Seeking Our Commons in Asia: How Can We Create Visions for the Future?” throughout this essay by calling up the eloquent words of the late American writer Jonathan Rowe¹ on what constitutes our commons:

[T]he commons, [is] the shared heritage of us all, for which we all serve as trustees...It has a natural dimension, such as the oceans and atmosphere, rivers and wild places, the diversity of species, the quiet of the night...[and] a social dimension: language and culture, the stories and games of childhood, the street life of cities, the vast stores of human know-how and knowledge, the new informational crossroads of the World Wide Web...²

This essay summarises my experiences in ALFP over the two months of the Program, providing the context to the emergent themes. I then share my reflections on these themes, and conclude with some thoughts on the way forward (in broad terms, rather than as a laundry list of suggestions). I must stress at the outset that these themes, reflections and ideas are by no means exhaustive.³

Summary of ALFP Activities

Throughout September and October 2015, we attended, as a group, over fourteen seminars, meetings and visits spanning the socio-economic and political situations of our sub-regions, current issues in Japan and Asia, and some much appreciated aspects of Japanese cultural expression.⁴ Some of these engagements were directly relevant to our respective fields of experience, others admittedly less so. On the whole, all have been helpful in broadening our

¹ Former editor of the *Washington Monthly* and co-founder of On The Commons, an organization which promotes commons-based solutions to global problems.

² Jonathan Rowe, “The Promise of the Commons,” *Earth Island Journal* (2002), <<http://jonathanrowe.org/the-promise-of-the-commons>>, (accessed October 2015).

³ A more comprehensive list of my areas of interest and concerns under the theme of this Program is contained in my Discussion Paper, presented in Hakone on September 13, 2015 and available for reference from the ALFP Secretariat.

⁴ Details are available from the ALFP Program Schedule 2015.

perspectives and understanding across disciplines, which has sometimes proven challenging given our diverse backgrounds.

Aside from these “compulsory” group activities which were built into the Program, each of us pursued “optional” activities based on our individual and professional interests. I expand on these here because they have been most instructive for me: fitting together like pieces of puzzle, they form a complex and intriguing snapshot of Japanese society today, and indeed our region and world at large. To name a few, in no particular order, these activities included observing the Jing Forum dialogue between Chinese and Japanese students from Beijing University and the University of Tokyo; speaking on and discussing human rights, gender, and civil society in Malaysia at Kyushu University; workshop discussions on current issues in Japan with participants from the Nitobe Kokusai Juku as well as with fellows of the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program and Brazil Science Without Borders; attending the massive public protest against the new security bills outside the Diet building; meeting and hearing critical insights on current issues in Japan from some of the top journalists at Asahi Shimbun; visiting the elderly nursing care facility of Fujisetsu-kai social welfare corporation in Atsugi; attending a symposium on Japan’s gender equal labor legislation, assessing the impact of the equal employment law on women in the country; and attending a forum on misogyny in relation to women’s sexuality and gender norms in Japan. Much of my learning also took place through other informal exchanges, for which I am tremendously grateful to the individuals involved.

Emergent Themes and Reflections

Drawing from the above experiences in the Program, two key themes emerge for me. First, it is clear that traditional systems—of government and governance, political alliances, the market and social institutions—can no longer provide answers for our increasingly complex problems. Things as we know them are breaking down. As Rowe puts it:

The commons is not the market and it is not the state. It is the space around and between, the source and context of both... It is a generic term for all that is subject to corporate (and governmental) trespass, expropriation, despoliation, and abuse.⁵

From the hundreds of thousands of displaced and suicidal farmers in the heartlands of India,⁶ to ongoing efforts (at diplomatic levels and beyond) to negotiate China’s global ascendancy (while within the country, mass urbanization is creating a generation of “left-behind” children)⁷ the political unrest in Thailand⁸ and Malaysia, the potential leap in unequal

⁵ Rowe, “The Promise of the Commons,” <<http://jonathanrowe.org/the-promise-of-the-commons>>.

⁶ I thank ALFP Fellow Jaideep Hardikar (India) for his strong articulations on this issue throughout the Program.

⁷ I am grateful to ALFP Fellow Yin Shuxi (China) for his contributions to me on this point.

bargaining power among corporations and states party to the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) and the scale of environmental degradation within the region (including, as Dr. Kanjanavanit has pointed out, Japan's forestry policies affecting the endogenous balance of flora and fauna),⁹ our countries, economies and peoples are suffering from the effects of massive neo-liberal globalization which are taking us into an unprecedented world order where the old answers do not work anymore. A new vision for the future is not an option; it is imperative to our survival.

Secondly, we ignore the conventionally "hidden" dimension of social reproduction and care work, including women's roles, at our collective peril. Rowe describes its relationship with our commons as follows:

The commons occupies the place in the economy that women once did, and to some extent still do. It is a realm of productivity that gets little recognition or respect. It does much of society's work and often the most important work.¹⁰

As David Bollier writes,

The basic problem today is that capitalist markets and economics routinely ignore the "care economy" -- the world of household life and social conviviality may be essential for a stable, sane, rewarding life. Economics regards these things as essentially free, self-replenishing resources that exist outside of the market realm...They can be ignored or exploited at will...In this sense, the victimization of women in doing care work is remarkably akin to the victimization suffered by commoners, colonized persons and nature. They all generate important non-market value that capitalists depend on—yet market economics refuses to recognize this value. It is no surprise that market enclosures of care work and commons proliferate.¹¹

The Japanese feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko criticizes neo-liberal market forces for making women, overrepresented in (economically disadvantageous) informal sectors of the labor force, "the functional equivalent of migrant workers," and argues that the present system (including expectations that women have to work like men to thrive as employees, and where women have been further polarized into elite / highly successful career women or into the other extreme) has "created a country where we cannot have children...neo-liberalization

⁸ I appreciate ALFP Fellow Saranarat Kanjanavanit's Country Report on September 9, 2015, which covered the military coups and overall political volatility in Thailand.

⁹ Saranarat Kanjanavanit, lecture on "Reading Nature" delivered at Hitotsubashi University, (October 20, 2015).

¹⁰ Rowe, "The Promise of the Commons," <<http://jonathanrowe.org/the-promise-of-the-commons>>.

¹¹ David Bollier, *The Care Centred Economy : A New Theory of Value*, (published April 29, 2015), <<http://bollier.org/blog/care-centered-economy-new-theory-value>>.

wants both babies and work and it's killing us.”¹² It is important to understand the link between the situation of women in Japan, and the phenomenon of depopulation it faces.

The situation of women's participation in decision-making in Malaysia, by comparison, is not so different. Studies show that our women are hindered from progressing in leadership roles across various sectors through the “glass ceiling” phenomenon, the challenges of work-life balance and the “double burden” on women in terms of work and family commitments, and the “invisible woman” syndrome rooted in prevailing cultural gender norms where women are expected to be modest and self-effacing¹³ (and make everyone tea while they are at it!).

Prevailing cultural norms and gender stereotypes affect women, men, and families. We need to re-evaluate the underlying work culture and the valuing of the care economy which is shaped in part by market forces, and to explore the role that men can play in creating a more equal society and economy for (different classes of) women.

Coming from a country where 20% of the workforce comprises migrant workers, and of these, where women are still primarily confined to domestic work under oppressive conditions, I feel that for Japan (or any other country for that matter) to relax policies on migrant labor without ensuring compliance with human rights norms, standards, and social adjustments—while possibly benefiting Japanese women in terms of easing domestic burdens—may lead to further oppression of (another class of migrant) women. I have also preliminarily observed that care work in Japan is highly feminized¹⁴ and again, what needs to be questioned are traditional views about gender divisions of labor.

Conclusion: Approaches on the Way Forward

Given the complexity of the problem, I feel that the way forward is neither clear-cut nor single dimensional. No “one size fits all” answer is going to apply all across Asia. Structural reforms, such as the creation and enhancement of inter-governmental mechanisms for peacebuilding and armed conflict resolution,¹⁵ are important in the long term to promote stability in the region. Equally important is a sea change in terms of our approach to governance through people's participation, and connectivity at the level of the individual through technological platforms, including through initiatives such as citizen journalism¹⁶ and

¹² Presentation at the symposium on gender equal labor legislation organized by the Gender Studies group of the Science Council of Japan, co-sponsored by the Women and Labor 21 Forum, (October 25, 2015, Tokyo).

¹³ “Towards Achieving at Least 30 Percent Participation of Women at Decision Making Levels in Malaysia,” report published in 2008 by the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

¹⁴ From my meeting with Ms. Matagi Kyoko of the Fujisetsu-kai social welfare corporation in Atsugi on October 21, 2015, I understand that the vast majority of employees of the elderly care service facility it operates, from the managers to the attendants, are women; both men and women service users prefer women caregivers.

¹⁵ As has been discussed with ALFP Fellow Arulanantham Sarveswaran (Sri Lanka).

¹⁶ Championed by ALFP Fellow Harry Surjadi (Indonesia).

the effective use of the internet and social media. Dialogue across divides and stakeholders—governments, civil society, corporations, and individuals—has always been crucial and will continue to be; we will keep having to create more spaces for this. Finally, the role of the creative realm—the arts—should not be underestimated in its capacity to inspire and drive us towards solutions beyond the mundane.¹⁷

Paper received from the author in December 2015

¹⁷ I thank ALFP Fellow Dinah Roma (the Philippines) for her insights on poetry as part of the cultural commons with tremendous power to spark social change.