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The Role of Home Economics in Rebuilding Filipino Families and Communities in the Next Century¹

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Families face inordinate pressures as a social institution that is the bedrock of humanity: hunger and malnutrition, poverty, lack of access to education, inadequate or compromised shelter, strained and shifting family dynamics, gendered inequality, unsustainability due to irresponsible consumption and production, and the lingering ravages of a global health pandemic (COVID-19). To mark the powerful anniversary (100 years) of home economics in the Philippines, the conference planners honored me with the task of discussing the role of home economics in *rebuilding* Filipino families and communities in the next century.

As I began to prepare my thoughts, I assumed the role of the devil's advocate. That is, for the sake of argument, I critically unpacked the choice of the verbs *redesigning* (conference theme) and *rebuilding* (my topic) for a centennial, celebratory event. To begin, the conference theme is "Redesigning the material and relational aspects of life through home economics." The verb *redesign* highlights the perceived need for home economists to change the existing design by revising daily life in terms of its appearance, function, and content (Stevenson, 2011). That suggests that redesigning (revising) aspects of daily life involves helping families and communities examine, reconsider, and improve both the material (physical, economic, and technological) and relational (emotional and social) aspects of their lives.

When it comes to *rebuilding* families (the verb used in my assigned keynote topic), I assumed that the conference planners did not mean that home economists should dismantle and reassemble families and communities and rebuild them using new parts, like rebuilding a car. I assumed instead that they meant reinforcing or strengthening them, like rebuilding a bridge. They may also have meant helping them revert to a previous condition by reorganizing, restoring, or reshaping themselves after they were challenged and compromised – like rebuilding a shattered life or rebuilding a threatened system or institution (Sinclair, 2012; Stevenson, 2011).

I thus assumed that rebuild is a verb for actions that home economists might take to create *rebuilt* families and communities (rebuilt is an adjective) – home economists would take action, and families and communities would benefit. This assumption then begged the question, "What happened to families and communities during the last century that they must be *rebuilt* in the next century?" In other words, *built anew*, which can mean (a) rebuild as they were before or (b) rebuild in a different form (Sinclair, 2012; Stevenson, 2011). What actions do Filipino families and communities *need* from home economists? Part of

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my answer involved developing a profile of existing Filipino families and the challenges they face going into the next century.

Profile of the Philippines and Filipino families

Nearly 113 million Filipino citizens live in an archipelago comprising more than 7000 islands, but most live on 11 islands. The country is divided into 17 regions comprising 81 provinces, 146 cities, and nearly 1500 municipalities. A third of the population live in Metro Manila and its neighbouring regions. The official languages and the media (language) of educational instruction are Filipino and English (Hernandez et al., 2022). Although mainly Roman Catholic (80%), “the peoples of the Philippines are Asian in consciousness and aspiration” (Hernandez et al., 2022, para. 2). Filipinos are predominately of Malay descent, but they can also have Chinese, American, and Spanish ancestry (Hernandez et al., 2022). There is substantial ethnic diversity in the Philippines, which reports four main groups (Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano, and Bisaya/Binisaya) (58%) with the rest characterized as Other (42%) (Cultural Atlas, 2022).

The World Bank (2022) described the Philippines as having “increasing urbanization, a growing middle class, and a large and young population” (para. 1). The median age is 39 (per the 2016 census). In 2020, one quarter (26.8%) of the population was young adult (aged 15–29). Thirty percent were aged 14 or younger. Mature adults comprised one third of the population (34.1%, aged 30–59) (Hernandez et al., 2022). The literacy rate in the Philippines is very high, holding at 97% (Global Data, 2022). The lower income class comprises one quarter (23.7%) of the population suggesting a healthy middle class (Philippine Statistics Authority). Many people attend higher education (about 33%) but in a perplexing contrast, over two thirds (67%) of primary school students drop out before grade six.

Its market-based economy comprises agriculture; light industries (consumer-oriented, low capital intensive); and services. COVID-19 severely impacted economic growth in the Philippines (averaging 4.5% GDP before the global pandemic), but the economy has started to recover with a reported 5.6% GDP for 2021. Gross national income per capita was US\$3,430 in 2020 before COVID. The pandemic curtailed a previous upward trend in real wages, which manifested in heavy declines in previously strong consumption and investment growth. This trend is expected to reverse as fallout from the pandemic begins to wain. The Filipino economy is expected to rebound with an associated positive impact on poverty reduction, which was declining before the pandemic (16.6% in 2018) (World Bank, 2022). The Philippines reports a high incidence of family members working abroad and/or overseas and sending money and care packages/gift boxes (*Padala boxes*) back home to support their family and kin (Alama, 2020; Cultural Atlas, 2022).

The balance in the urban-rural Filipino population is quite even, 47% and 53% respectively, but more and more people are moving to the cities (urbanization). A significant number of these urban dwellers live in poverty without regular access to running water, electricity, or sanitation services. Their impermanent urban homes are often made of scavenged materials (e.g., bamboo, wood, or sheet metal). Rural homes are one or two rooms elevated on piles. Coastal homes are raised above the water to accommodate tides and boat traffic. Networks of elevated pathways connect the houses within coastal communities (Hernandez et al., 2022; World Bank, 2022).

There are more females (62%) than males (39%) within the matriarchal Filipino culture. With Catholicism so prevalent, the *nuclear* family is the core family unit with family life revolving around the *extended* family (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives as well as close friends). Although there is growing acceptance of people remaining single (unmarried), marriage with children is still expected.

Having children out of wedlock is often mitigated by marriage before the child is born. This staves off social repercussions and stigmatization. That said, divorce between two Filipinos is illegal. Divorce between a Filipino and a foreigner may be recognized if validly obtained according to the foreign spouse's national law. The divorced Filipino resident from that dissolved arrangement can remarry (Cultural Atlas, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2022; Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2022).

Rural families average three children with urban families being smaller. Once children marry, they tend to live with their parents. Indeed, "the Philippines is a collectivist society, in which the needs of the family are prioritized over the needs of the individual" (AFS-USA, 2022, para. 2). The Filipino family is guided by *filial piety* (dutiful care and respect for parents and elders) to avoid *hiya* (shame or embarrassment) and losing face (i.e., reputation, influence, dignity, and/or honour) (Cultural Atlas, 2022).

Alama (2020) referred to this as "family centrism and family expectations" (para. 10). "The centrality of family in Filipino life reinforces the obligation to provide care and support for the family member, especially the parents [hence the large extended families]. Family-centrism is where identity and future life revolve around the family needs — *pamilya muna* (family first)" (Alama, 2020, para. 13). Filial piety is essential to a family unit maintaining its collective face (i.e., saving face) (Cultural Atlas, 2022).

Destabilized Filipino families

In 2012, Mabasa creatively coined the term *D-SPEARS* to reflect the major issues threatening the safety, health, well-being, and future of Filipino families. **D** represents the **disintegration** and frailty of families in the form of domestic violence, abuse, and harassment. Families were also being *speared* by substance abuse, **p**arental absenteeism, **e**conomic difficulties, the **a**bsence of family goals and presence of deteriorating values, the **r**ising incidence of teenage pregnancies and early sexual involvement, and the strong negative impact of media.

The fallout of D-SPEARS included (a) the parent's inability to provide social control within the family unit and (b) fewer opportunities for a cohesive family unit with solidarity (especially when one or both parents were working abroad and sending money home). (c) Economic difficulties forced children to leave school and go to work. (d) Both parents working exposed children to street hazards because no one was home when school ended (Mabasa, 2012). (e) Parents' inability to recognize and inculcate in their children a higher meaning of and purpose for the family unit lead to a loss of family goals and the deterioration of family values, which provide anchors in hard times. The absence of family values (i.e., valuing the family) thus created susceptible weak spots in the family unit. (f) An excessive, inadequately monitored media presence compromised already-strained interpersonal relationships and family ties. (g) Teens' early sexual involvement exposed them to sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancies, too-early marriages, emotional wounds, and wasted lives; the whole family is affected (Mabasa, 2012).

Actions Home Economists can take to rebuild Filipino families

Mabasa (2012) tendered an array of suggestions for overcoming the negative impact of D-SPEARS. Using her ideas (she called them *OVERCOMES*), I propose that home economists should help Filipino families (a) have **open** and honest communication, (b) employ zero tolerance for violence or any form of abuse and (c) become **empowered** (i.e., find their inner power and strength). We should help families (d) strengthen relationships among their members; (e) develop **communication**, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; and (f) value and ensure regular family **outings** and **get-togethers**. (g) We should teach parents how

to monitor their children's media exposure and (h) teach adults about career planning and gaining employment so economic benefits can be realized for improved family welfare. (i) Finally, we should help families appreciate the importance of nurturing spirituality to offset ready reliance on materialism and consumerism.

This comprehensive roster of actions addresses both material and relational aspects of daily life – things that can be concretely targeted when rebuilding families. But context also matters. Home economists working in different regions of the Philippines will need different technical knowledge and expertise. Many urban dwellers tend to lack water, sanitation, electricity, and permanent shelters. Rural dwellers have shelters but their living accommodations are crowded, and they face issues while living off the land (agricultural employment and subsistence farming). Coastal dwellers face quality of life challenges inherent with living and working on the water.

In addition to tailored technical expertise, home economists can choose to orient themselves to comprehensive, foundational aspects of practice as inferred from the conference rhetoric: (a) use insights from the International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE), (b) build on the potential role of home economics vis-a-vis the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and (c) view the University of the Philippines' (UP) College of Home Economics' (CHE) seven subdisciplines as having a competitive advantage in the post-pandemic era.

Build on IFHE's insights

In existence since 1908, IFHE is sustained by individual and organizational membership from 60 countries. It has consultative status at the United Nations and is a respected and legitimate voice and authority on families at the international level (IFHE, 2019). IFHE (2019) affirmed that home economists use an interdisciplinary, integrated approach as they address the reciprocal relationship between humans' rights and responsibilities to others and to sustainability. Using a holistic (systems-focused) approach, home economists promote the optimal improvement of individual and family well-being and quality of life. They help people find their inner power (gain self-empowerment) to be positive change agents for their own lives and others. Home economists hone and ply this unique perspective as researchers, scientists, educators, policymakers, entrepreneurs (business involvement), and civil society and development agents.

IFHE (2008) further conceptualized four home economics practice dimensions. As an academic discipline, it socializes and educates new scholars into the profession, conducts research, and uses resultant data and their interpretation to create new knowledge and ways of thinking. Second, it focuses on everyday living where people meet their basic human needs and develop their human growth and potential. Third, as a curriculum area, it prepares people for life by teaching them how to discover and develop their capabilities. In the societal arena, it influences and develops policy to enable families to achieve well-being, empowerment, transformation, and sustainable futures. IFHE's framing of the profession affirms that Filipino home economists striving to rebuild families and communities can exercise their influence in research, education/curricula, the policy arena, and families' daily lives. They can also take action as employees or consultants to industry or in their own entrepreneurial initiatives.

Focus on human condition. Filipino home economists could lean heavily on other IFHE position statements as they leverage power to rebuild families and communities for the next century. Recently, IFHE (2019) espoused that "home economics brings the focus of households as building blocks of sustainable societies" (p. 1). As they work toward rebuilding Filipino families, home economists can message widely

and loudly that they have a focus on the home for the good of humanity (McGregor, 2022). McGregor and Piscopo (2021) tendered the compelling idea that rather than just working with and for families, home economists also work *through* families using them as a means to an end with that *end* being an improved human condition. Humanity's present condition (state of being) reflects the totality of actions that humans have taken to date — leading to degrees of prosperousness, sustainability, justice, stability, solidarity, peace, hope, and so on. Strong families are the bedrock of a supportive human condition, which in turn sustains individuals and families (McGregor, 2022).

Contribute to national development. National development focuses on improving “the economy, entrepreneurship and opportunity, governance, education, health, safety and security, personal freedom, and social capital” (Global Sherpa, 2012, para. 10). Strong Filipino individuals, families, and communities bode well for national development in the Philippines, but right now many elements pursuant to the material and relational aspects of daily life are in jeopardy: poverty alleviation, accessible housing, employment opportunities, healthy family and social dynamics, and so on (Mabasa, 2012). To help rebuild Filipino families, home economists must become involved in national development (Gabriel, 1998). IFHE, de facto, supported this assertion by publishing my discussion/provocation paper on this topic (McGregor, 2019).

I just cited to a renowned Philippine home economist, Florenda Gabriel, who clarified that “home economics does not by itself produce the desirable changes necessary for national development to occur” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 4). Instead, “the primary change agent is the government which sets the national direction and strategies for development” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 7). Home economists act as a bridge and catalyst between families and governments by translating “macro-level policies to micro-level implementation” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 7). Because home economists diligently work for and with individuals and families and gather “baseline data” about their circumstances and human condition, they are “ideal persons to draft programs of action [that can feed into national development plans]” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 7).

Convincing government officials to respect and draw on the home economics knowledge base can contribute to nation building. Our knowledge can be used to reduce poverty, homelessness, crime, compromised health status, and other material factors negatively impacting a healthy economy and working nation. From a relational perspective, home economics interventions, preventions, and education can improve family dynamics and help parents prepare future citizens that contribute to the nation (Gabriel, 1998; Italo, 2020; McGregor, 2019).

Gain philosophical awareness. I am also convinced that if they want to successfully rebuild Filipino families and communities in the next century, home economists must sustain themselves by being fully aware of their belief system, which informs and guides their practice (i.e., be philosophically astute). At the 2014 IFHE congress in Canada, I spoke about home economists' penchant to resist philosophical awareness and grounding (McGregor, 2014). I encourage Filipino home economists to undertake an individual and collective self-inventory of their working philosophies to discern if philosophical work is necessary to bring clarity to their practice, so they are successful in their rebuilding efforts.

This task can involve both the *form* and *substance* aspects of personal and professional philosophies. Philosophy takes its form from what entities we are concerned about, how we come to know about them, and the values and ethics that shape our practice about these entities (McGregor, 2012; Salsberry, 1994). To illustrate, our focus is individuals and families (alone and as social institutions). We come to *know* about them by studying their everyday lives lived out in their homes and households shaped in relationship with internal and external factors. Our intent is to help them improve, optimize, and enhance their well-being

and quality of life (our profession's values) so we can contribute to their valued ends – what is important to them as determined by them.

The *substance* of our philosophy (its solid basis in practice) manifests in the profession's unique perspective on its form (Salsberry, 1994). Heeding insights from other parts of the world (McGregor, 2009), I encourage Filipino home economists to discern the substance of *their* professional philosophy. North American home economists focus on well-being, quality of life, and standard of living as interpreted through critical science and reflective leadership. Scandinavians are concerned with everyday life, competent, thoughtful practice, and being integral specialists. Baltic home economists care deeply for the humanistic aspects of daily life. Japanese home economists strive for the restoration of humanity via human protection and the home as habitation (place of existential hope). Australia is guided by being an expert novice, viewing home economics at a convergent moment, and future proofing the profession. What is the philosophical cornerstone – the *substance* – of Filipino home economics?

Bring Home Economics perspective to SDGs

Filipino home economists are encouraged to take clear guidance from IFHE's (2019) policy statement about a home economics perspective on six of the United Nation's 17 SDGs: poverty, hunger, health and well-being, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, and responsible consumption and production. Most of these issues were clearly evident in the demographic and contextual profile that I shared about the Philippines and Filipino families. IFHE (2019) maintained that the profession's focus on the economic, social, and ecological aspects of everyday living enables home economists to bring a unique perspective to attaining these six SDGs. Filipino home economists can embrace this IFHE perspective. Home economists interpret daily life from an interdisciplinary, integrative, holistic, and relational perspective. They thus view each goal as an inherent part of a complex collection of problems – the SDGs do not stand in isolation and cannot be solved in isolation (IFHE, 2019).

To illustrate, home economists appreciate that dealing with poverty requires education. Ensuring education requires gender equality. Good health and well-being are tied to responsible consumption and production. Clean water and sanitation are intricately tied to poverty eradication, good health, and so on. The SDGs cannot be achieved by focusing on one goal at a time. Our integrative mindset readily accepts this imperative. Filipino home economists are encouraged to acknowledge, employ, and message this aspect of their approach to the SDGs. This strategy will lend legitimacy and authority to their voices around any rebuilding efforts related to SDGs impacting Filipino families and communities.

Claim CHE's competitive advantage

UP's CHE faculty members can actively tout their seven subdisciplines as having a powerful *competitive advantage* in the lingering post-pandemic era: community nutrition; food technology; family life and child development; hotel, restaurant, and institution management; clothing technology; interior design; and general home economics education (UP, 2021). Their generalized and specialized knowledge mean they can legitimately speak for and represent individuals and families' interests relative to other stakeholders.

At the crux of a competitive advantage is the assumption that someone is in competition with others via striving for superiority or defeating them (win/lose mentality). Having a competitive *advantage* (i.e., favourable position to gain benefits) simply means someone is able to contribute or do something more efficiently than a rival. Capitalizing on this advantage lets someone outperform or overcome their

competitors (Porter, 1985). But home economists do not work in their own self-interest. They are concerned instead with the interest and welfare of individuals, families, and communities, a welfare that is deeply impacted by internal and external mitigating factors. Interdisciplinary, integrative, and holistic home economics thinkers, who specialize in content about issues faced by Filipino citizens, definitely have an advantage in the political, economic, and social arenas.

To everyone's benefit, home economists have an edge over others who are narrow, linear thinkers and narrowly specialized or held hostage by their self-interest. Home economists holistically *see* connections and find synergies that others easily miss – they can connect the dots. They critically reflect on a situation (discerning power dynamics) and strive to collaborate in reciprocal relationships with other stakeholders. Those involved tend to respect resultant solutions that in turn are more sustainable when implemented. CHE-trained and professionally socialized home economists can choose to reframe themselves as having a competitive advantage that makes them legitimate players in the game. Paradoxically, they can bolster their competitive advantage by working collaboratively while *rebuilding* Filipino individuals, families, and communities.

Conclusion

In closing, I am not the one to say what *rebuilt* Filipino families and communities might look like. Nor should my thoughts constitute the final words on how Filipino home economists should move forward. That said, I do feel comfortable, as one home economist speaking to another, suggesting that you should look inward and outward to discern the dynamics of your current context. You should then approach your rebuilding and redesigning enterprise from a contextually informed and philosophically aware stance. Working for, with, and through families, Filipino home economists can collaboratively create a strategic blueprint for *rebuilt* families and communities scaffolded to take on the next century.

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