

# **The Fight against Information Poverty of Filipino Youth: Lessons Learned From the GILAS Project (Gearing-up Internet Literacy and Access for Students)**

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## **1. Context**

How do you connect the inhabitants of the more than 7,000 islands of the Republic of the Philippines? How is it possible to make them identify as one nation and proud of being Filipinos? How do you give them access to global resources, more effective knowledge and learning opportunities, and help them to improve the quality of their lives? These and other challenging questions were the focus of Ayala Foundation leaders as they responded to the complex needs and lives of Filipinos. The private companies that comprise the Ayala Foundation, having recognized the Government's financial limitations to develop information technology, set a goal of bridging the digital divide in the Philippines by helping students to cultivate their talents and ingenuity and helping the country to preserve its national culture, languages, and rich traditions.

The vision that Internet literacy is the most cost-effective investment that could be made at the present time captured the attention of other private and public organizations. These organizations were concerned with the state of education and Internet illiteracy of Filipino youth and saw it as a way to bridge the disparity in academic achievement between Philippine high schools. Eventually, a multi-sectoral alliance, consisting of government members, private companies, academia and NGOs, was formed, and a plan to eliminate Internet literacy of Filipino high school students was developed.

This case study explores how a multi-stakeholder partnership (MSPE) worked to help provide public schools in the Philippines with computers and connected them to the Internet. To encourage a detailed assessment, we utilize early indicators of success explaining what worked well in the project. A serious analysis of the project's benefits and challenges requires data on implementation outcomes. The results of such an evaluation will permit us to understand the full effect of the Project on the state of education and learning in the Philippines.

## **2. Why the Project Was Needed**

The Philippines spends approximately \$64 per student annually on secondary education – a relatively low amount compared to \$7,500 in the USA and \$5,000 in Singapore. The huge budget deficit and other serious challenges facing the country make it difficult for the government to increase educational spending. The low level of spending results in a lack of classrooms and teachers, minimal training for teachers, curricula in need of improvement, and poorly stocked libraries. Only about 40 per cent of Philippines public schools are equipped with computer laboratories and less than 6 per cent of those were connected to the Internet in 2004

(December 4) as compared to Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, where 100% of their schools are connected.

As a result, the quality of schooling in the Philippines has been deteriorating. Statistics for education are grim: The national grade average for 4<sup>th</sup> graders is 47%, for grade 6 it is 58.7%, with the minimum passing grade of 75%. TIMSS 2003 tests have shown Philippine students to be lagging in mathematics and science. Only 63 out of 100 children entering grade 6 actually finish the grade. There is a shortage of classroom space, desks, chairs, textbooks and teachers. At present, only three out of every 100 Filipino students who enter 1st grade will finish college. Only 45% will finish secondary school.

The lack of graduates creates a shortfall of qualified applicants in the work force. As a result, inadequately prepared students graduate from high school and enter the labour market. Work force productivity and competitiveness depend on the modern worker's ability to use computers and know how to get access to resources available on the Internet. For many Filipino youths, high school is the highest level of education they can afford before they join the work force. With the challenges that globalization presents, a country that wants to be competitive and prepared for the changes in the information and communication sector, can ill afford for this situation to continue.

Libraries in the country are in poor condition and in need of basic books. Internet labs, which could provide a quick answer to some of the problems, are available in only 6% of the schools. Computer labs could also provide tools for IT training, which in turn would permit students to become more competitive in a business environment that requires computer skills. Computers might also facilitate networking among schools and students; promote sharing of teaching modules, standardization of teaching material, and teacher training.

### **3. *The GILAS Project***

About one million senior high school students enroll in Philippine public schools every year. Only a small number use computer laboratories and even a smaller number benefit from Internet connection. The GILAS (Gearing-up Internet Literacy and Access for Students) project presumes connection of all Philippines' public high schools to the Internet, student training and teachers with ICT for education skills, with a connection rate of 1000 schools per year between 2006 and 2010. The main target group for this project is high school students. However, lower grades may benefit from the existing laboratories and gain familiarity with Internet resources at an earlier age.

GILAS aims to deliver servers or routers, Local Area Network (LAN) cards and cables, and provide connectivity and free Internet usage for the first year. Ten computers are to be delivered to each school and Internet access is to be provided for schools without computer equipment. Basic computer training is to be provided for teachers and formulation of basic curriculum and year-long lesson plan is offered. The cost of connectivity is US\$2,000 for one school, and when added to the \$4,000 cost of hardware for 10 PCs, this makes a sub-total of US\$6,000 per school. The total cost of the project is therefore about \$28,000 million for all public high schools.

Stage One of the project includes a survey of schools. Prioritization of schools to be connected to the Internet is Stage Two. In Stage Three, the rest of public schools will be

provided with computers and Internet access. The project began implementation in January 2006.

Since that time, one private company, Innove Communications, has committed to connect 600 public schools over the next two years. Of these 600 schools, 300 are located in Mindanao, one of the poorest provinces of the Philippines. This decision may encourage the receipt of a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and will perhaps for the first time bring Mindanao in line with the rest of the country. By January – August 2007: P38.8 million was raised, and within 5 months from the launch of the project, 90 public schools were connected to the Internet. GILAS will provide monitoring and evaluation of schools throughout the implementation of the project. Incentives will be given to schools to ensure that computers used according to guidelines and properly maintained. Additional incentives include inter-school competition with rewards such as free equipment upgrades or software packages.

#### **4. Five Lessons**

A number of lessons can be synthesized from the experiences of the GILAS Project so far. These demonstrate both the critical role of partnerships in education, as well as the inherent challenges they face.

##### *Lesson One: Have a Vision and Clear Objectives*

The multi-sectoral partners share a vision that technology is a powerful tool to address the education gap among the country's youth, and that Internet connection is the most efficient and cost-saving way to address this gap. Access to the Internet provides not only access to global resources, but also electronic encyclopediae that aid in research, science and foreign languages. Computer labs at schools provide tools for computer training, which prepares high-school students for jobs in the fast growing industry and other fields requiring computer skills. This far-reaching goal helped the partners to unite and create a multi-sectoral network in order to launch the project.

##### *Lesson Two: Provide Strong Leadership at the Highest Levels*

Under the auspices of the Ayala Foundation, a Steering Committee was formed, consisting of government officials, private sector and academia. Individual leadership was a strong motivator in the project: Senator Manuel Roxas II and Mr. Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala II, President of Ayala Corporation and Vice Chairman of the Ayala Foundation, became working Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee. The President of the Republic was named Honorary Chairperson, and the Secretary, Department of Education, became Honorary Vice Chairperson of the Steering Committee. CEOs from some of the country's largest and most progressive corporations agreed to serve as members of the Steering Committee.

##### *Lesson Three: Create a Support Network*

Among the companies whose CEOs serve as Steering Committee members are IBM, Microsoft, Intel, Smart/PLDT, Digitel, Bayantel, Integrated microelectronics, Inc., SPI Technologies, and Globe/Innove. Civic, social, development, and donor organizations joined. The network of business associations, civic organizations and foundations, academic institutions, private companies and public organizations began to work side-by-side and made significant improvements for Filipino youth. The idea that large problems require large-scale cooperation became a cementing factor for this partnership.

#### *Lesson Four: Get Buy-in from the Entire Population*

What is there for me? This question is asked by many people before they commit funds or think of ways they can help. Once the infrastructure has been put into place, everyone may benefit from the project. At present, most public school library collections are outdated. With the help of the Internet, users can connect to the Filipinas Heritage Library and gain access to the wealth of Filipino culture and the collection on Philippine history, art, language, religion, and the social sciences. Its online services benefit students, teachers, librarians, and enthusiasts in the Philippines as well as abroad. As mentioned above, lower grade students may also use the computer network. In addition, computer courses for the adults may be offered in classrooms. Outside users may also share their knowledge and expertise with high school students and their teachers.

#### *Lesson Five: Incorporate a More Exclusive Donor Philosophy*

Donations from citizens and companies are channeled through the Ayala Foundation. Following receipt of a donation, donors receive a letter of acknowledgement from the leaders of the Foundation. Donors may provide gifts using credit cards or sending a cheque. This is how donations have traditionally been collected in the Philippines. Leaders of the Foundation also found an unusual way to raise funds. This reflects the non-exclusive philosophy for supporting GILAS, which ensures support from many parts of the population. Leaders suggest in-kind donations while organizations and donors can adopt a school by checking the GILAS high school database for schools to fund in their home town. Individuals in local communities are encouraged to match investments made by a member of the community and companies are encouraged to provide matching gifts.

The list of ideas is almost endless: write an article on GILAS in the local paper or web site; tell about GILAS at a community meeting or in church; organize your own program to raise money for high schools; and advocate GILAS while hosting charity dinners, golf tournaments, Christmas bazaars, rock concerts or fashion shows. If you have skills to share, one can also assist in computer training for students and teachers, assist in curriculum integration effort, or provide technical expertise in the installation of Internet connection.

Filipinos abroad may also contribute. In particular, the Ayala Foundation leaders organize talk shows and presentations in support of the project geared explicitly to expatriates. Recently, the TV news channel ABC 5 presented a short feature on Dada Banta, the most successful Filipino technology entrepreneur in Silicon Valley. Through Google's help, GILAS hopes to generate greater public awareness of and support for its efforts by directing more traffic towards the GILAS web site (<http://www.gilas.org>). Thanks to Ayala Foundation's branch in the USA, American mass media has also helped to advertise the project.

## **5. Conclusions**

The GILAS project shows how public-private partnerships can make a difference in improving education. Private sector companies are especially concerned with education in the country and the competitiveness of Filipino youth entering the labour market after high school. Thanks to this concern, the Project was conceived and the government involvement was obtained to address some aspects of the problem. The multi-stakeholder partnership combined ideas, efforts and funds to design a project which has the potential of achieving results quickly.

Questions remain, though, on how to make the project sustainable, ensure the selection of priority schools, maintain hardware and software, ensure good governance and co-ordination among stakeholders, and make certain that the schools continue being funded sufficiently to use the Internet connection beyond the year guaranteed by GILAS. In order to continue the project implementation successfully, it is important to conduct a full evaluation and thereby to understand what does not work well in the project, and why. For those who want to learn from the experiment, a set of recommendations should highlight the weaknesses of the project, in addition to its strengths.

### ***Links***

The Ayala Foundation: <http://www.ayalafoundation.org/>

Gilas: <http://www.gilas.org>