Economic Empowerment from Montana to Southeast Asia and Back

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Every day when we turn on the news we hear a deluge of statistics about the economy: number of jobs added or lost; the rise or fall of stocks and commodities; retail sales; the Consumer Price Index. While these economic indicators can tell us about the general state of the economy, what do they tell us about people? What do they tell us about those who are on the frontlines battling poverty?

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana hopes to broaden the conversation about how individuals can cultivate economic empowerment with real results of increasing incomes and reducing poverty. The US Department of State awarded the Mansfield Center with a $425,000 grant to implement an exchange program between professionals in Montana and Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam in the area of economic empowerment. The goal of the program is for American and Asian fellows to share strategies to generate economic growth, broaden social opportunity, and ensure that benefits of growth and trade are more widely distributed.

The Economic Empowerment Fellows Program is one of many exchange programs the Mansfield Center has hosted over the past 30 years. The great statesman and ambassador, Mike Mansfield, was a strong proponent of international exchanges like the Economic Empowerment program. Says Mansfield, “By examining the political heritage, the economic experience and even the national myths that tie people together; by exploring the cultural, religious, and social forces that have molded a nation, we can begin to better understand each other and contribute to the knowledge and understanding that will strengthen our ties of friendship and lead to a better world.”
The Economic Empowerment Fellows Program will bring 20 Southeast Asian professionals to Montana for a month, where they will explore business models, government economic programs and policies, non-profit initiatives that support low-income and disadvantaged populations, and how socially responsible and charitable businesses are run. Asian fellows will be partnered with a Montana expert in their area of interest. In turn, the Montana partners will travel to Asia to learn how the fellows address similar issues in their countries. This exchange not only benefits the Asian fellows, but provides Montanans with a broader perspective, new approaches to poverty reduction and income generation, and a rich cultural experience that will join them together in an international network of inspiring people working toward shared goals.

Just last month, 14 women from Montana traveled to Southeast Asia as part of a similar exchange, the Women’s Empowerment program. The YWCA’s Sally Mullen was in Vietnam, blogging during her trip. She wrote, “It’s humbling to see these smart women working to improve conditions for women and kids ....The Vietnam Women’s Union ... runs the only two women’s shelters in Vietnam, one for domestic violence survivors and their kids, and one for women who have escaped from sex trafficking. The Director of the Union is really interested how to execute a thrift store model to help their constituents and help fund their cause. Oh my, did we have a fine time scheming away.”

I recently returned from Southeast Asia with Mansfield Associate Director, Deena Mansour. Together, we interviewed some of the more than 200 professionals interested in joining this program. One of the 20 inspiring fellows who will represent Southeast Asia is Ngoc Nong from Vietnam. She is one of the very few to leave her village to seek a university education. Instead of staying in the city for a promising career, she chose to move back to her home in one of the poorest provinces in the country to
improve the livelihoods of women, farmers, and ethnic minorities through microfinance and eco-tourism development.

One of the Montana families who hosted a Vietnamese fellow during our Women’s Empowerment program said, “I never thought I would be able to support women on a global level until I learned about [this program]. I actually think that I got more out of the visit than our Vietnamese guest....it was so insightful to learn that so much of her life parallels mine, even though we come from such different places.”

In keeping with the legacy of Mike Mansfield, we are honored to bring such an opportunity to Montana. If you are interested in being part of these programs, we would like to hear from you. Please see our website for current programs, at www.umt.edu/mansfield, or call us at 243-2988.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, I am Kelsey Stamm. Thank you for listening.