

# Balitang



The Official Newsletter of the Department of Agrarian Reform

Special Edition

## CONNECT



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# Taking the Risk: To Shift or Not to Shift?

For quite a time, when rice farmers were asked of their income, they would always reply, “Tama lang” or “Kulang pa.” One of these farmers is Enrique Aperong, a cluster member in Brgy. Del Pilar, Barotac Viejo, Iloilo.

Manong Ikeng, as fondly called by his friends, is a 64-year-old smallholder farmer, tilling a three-hectare farm. He became a farmer when he was 16 years old after being orphaned by his father. Young Ikeng helped his mother earn a living to send his siblings to school.

At 17, Ikeng married another orphan who had also been in the bondage of soil. Over the years, the two became partners in cultivating their farm.

According to Manong Ikeng, they used to plant rice in a two-hectare land and corn in another hectare of upland lot. Their income from farming and the honoraria he received as a barangay kagawad was not sufficient to lead a quality life.

For instance, he has observed that they yield of his rice farming has been unpredictable for nearly five decades.

“Ang pagpanguma kag patubas sa subong nga tiniun indi mo mapaktan, kung kis-a maayo man medyo mataas taas ukon subida pero masami manubo man ang patubas nga daw indi guid kabawi sang gastos (Farming and harvest nowadays is not certain, sometimes the yield is somewhat okay but oftentimes the yield is so low that it can hardly recover the cost of production),” Manong Ikeng said.

When asked why, he replied, “Resulta ina sang indi na mapaktan nga klima, atake sang peste kag masakit sa paray (This is due to the unpredictable weather condition, infestation of pest, and diseases of the crops).”

“Daku akon gastos sa abono kag hilo apang manubo man lang ang bakal sa amon produkto. Kami nga mangunguma makaluluoy lang kay ang mga negosyante sa banwa barato man lang ang pamakal sang palay kung tag arani. Gani nagapangutang ako para gastos sa uma kag pag harvest hunos ang utang, masami gamay na lang akon ginansiya kung dimalason dehado pa (I incur high expenses for fertilizer and other farm inputs while our produce are sold for a low price. We, the farmers, are at the mercy of businessmen because they offer the buying price during the peak or harvest season. That is why I obtain loan for production. Oftentimes, this translates to low income or even negative at its worst),” he added.

This circumstance has tied him to the “bayad-utang” scheme with the local trader from whom he obtains his production capital. He has wondered how to get through this and dreamed that there will come a time that farmers like him will have sufficient harvest and income.

In June 21, 2018, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) arrived in Brgy. Del Pilar to conduct an on-site orientation on the Linking Smallholder Farmers to Markets (LinkSFaRM). Manong Ikeng, a



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barangay kagawad and chairman of the barangay committee on agriculture, was approached by the LinkSFaRM team for the preparation of the venue and the ensuring of attendance of smallholder rice farmers in his constituency.

During the orientation, the importance of collective marketing of their major crop was highlighted. However, Manong Ikeng and the other farmers were not fully inspired. The present practice in the marketing of their produce is that traders go to their farms during harvest season.

Given this feedback, the site working group met again and agreed to introduce organically grown pigmented rice as a potential alternative crop.

The agro-enterprise facilitator (AEF) again scheduled to convene the farmers in the barangays covered by the LinkSFaRM project to conduct a seminar on organic

farming.

The AEF invited a credible resource person, Ofelia dela Cruz, an ARB farmer-practitioner, to impart the importance of organic farming and the high market potential of the organic pigmented rice.

Some of the farmers raised their apprehensions, “Mabudlayan siguro kami magpadamo produkto nga organic rice kay ang mga mangunguma subong mahilig na sa instant, kag paano kami mag adopter organic farming sa tunga sang parayan nga naga gamit pesticides. Ang ila sapat-sapat magakadto sa amon parayan pananglit. Kag kung indi kamo mag abono commercial fertilizer indi magdaku kag mamunga amon paray (We’ll experience difficulty in producing enough supply of organic rice. How could we adopt organic farming around farms where intensive chemical farming is being practiced. Their insects will go to our

## Taking the Risk: To Shift or Not to Shift?

farms and, without the use of commercial fertilizer, our palay will not grow)."

Despite their doubts, Manong Ikeng decided to join a cluster of 10 members who will try to grow pigmented rice and was chosen to be one of the leaders who will represent their cluster in the local study team.

He attended a series of farmer's facilitators training and other LinkSFarm activities onsite. He was also an active participant in the conduct of market chain studies where he learned and observed that there is an unmet demand for pigmented rice. It opened his eyes that the proposed focused commodity has a growing market. He heard that even doctors are encouraging patients with diabetes and hypertension to try this product. Furthermore, during his actual observation in the supermarket he noticed that available organic rice are sourced from as far as the provinces of Mindoro and Palawan.

Convinced of the promising market for pigmented rice, Manong Ikeng committed a about 7,500 sqm of his farm to planting black rice. However, due to delays in the delivery of seeds and lacking organic production inputs most of the cluster members went ahead with their conventional practices. Only Manong Ikeng and four other farmers waited and pursued the plan.

The challenges did not end here. Patanom Credit Cooperative had no window to extend credit to non-ARB members when Manong Ikeng needed money to pay laborers. These liabilities with fellow farmers caused their family shame and sleepless nights. The problem was resolved only after the cooperative manager lent Manong Ikeng money out of his own pocket.

Realizing the need for financial assistance to farmers who will be involved in the LinkSFarm project, the manager proposed to the cooperative's board of

directors to create a loan window. This was gladly favored and approved by the board. Manong Ikeng quickly availed a loan amounting to P11,840 for production input and labor. Meanwhile, the seeds from the LinkSFarm project finally arrived.

Despite of the inadequacy of water as an effect of early occurrence of El Nino, his farm was able to yield 1,610 kg. With a gross value of production of about P30,590 at a selling price of P19/kg and a total cost of production of about P12,591, he realized a gross income of P17,999.

"With this, I can now save in preparation for the next cropping," Manong Ikeng gladly remarked. He was happy with the result of his shift to organic rice farming. Without the effects of El Nino, his income would have been even better.

When asked if he will continue adopting the organic rice farming technology, without a trace of hesitation he replied, "*Huo, ako magapadayun sa pag adoptar sang organic farming kay makahatag sa akon dugang kita kag indi pa ako makahalit sa ika ayong lawas sang mga tawo subong man sa akon palibot. Sa pagkamatood, ako maga expand pa sang akon kabilugan nga area nga tanuman sang organic rice sa sunod nga cropping* (Yes, I will continue adopting organic rice farming to produce pigmented rice because it yielded increased income. Also, I am farming with no hazardous effects for both human and the environment. In fact, I will expand the practice to my entire rice plot in the next cropping season.)"

The positive outcome of his first try on a complete shift to organic rice farming and the experiences of five other farmers had been shared to other rice farmers. Indeed, there is money in pigmented organic rice. This cropping season, 19 additional farmers will try to plant chemical-free back rice in about 4.5 hectares of land. 🌱



## Crisis Turns into Opportunity

*"I have always been a loser in my life as a vegetable farmer. I am helpless in the face of the high cost of farm inputs and transportation and the prices in the market."* This is the lament of Nora Caligtan, a farmer leader and mother of three, who tills 3,500 square meters of land to support her family.



In 2010, collective marketing in Bauko started with 20 farmers that were organized by Abraham Akilit, who would become the town mayor of Bauko. Reverend Jerry Sagayo, parish priest in Barangay Monamon Norte, convinced these farmers with the help of Nora to try organic farming and supply vegetables at a fixed price.

Nora told them, "This is better than what we experience in conventional vegetable production. Many times, we go home after selling our products with our hearts broken. What we make is only enough to pay off debts incurred from previous production."

The group learned the ropes of organic farming with the help of Father Sagayo's wife, an employee of the Department of Agriculture. They completed the required trainings for their products to secured clearance from the Organic Certification Center of the Philippines.

It was not easy feat for the members. Not all expenses required in the completion of trainings were free. They shouldered their transportation and paid for the processing of their certification. Nora stood for the advocacy of organic farming and believed the group's sacrifice of time and resources will be worth it.

However, not everyone shared the same feeling, especially when it came to shelling out money for their dues. This was the root of friction between them. The original 20 members were reduced to 15.

After the endeavor proved successful, more farmers wanted to join. However, they could only accommodate a few because the demand is limited. Nora and her group looked for other markets and found LATOP MPC. She again convinced the members to join this cooperative so they could produce more. Their delivery was continuous until LATOP experienced an oversupply and Nora and the group was forced pull out. They brought home their products, unsold and rotting.

In fortuitous timing, the Linking Smallholder Farmers to Markets (LinkSFarm) project, under the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), was launched with Bauko as a project site. Nora, the manager of the Bauko Organic Practitioners Credit Cooperative, was the first contact of the agro-enterprise facilitator (AEF) in coordinating the LinkSFarm activities in Monamon Norte.

The AEF convinced Nora to join the project orientation to learn more about

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## Bauko, Mt. Province

collective marketing. She became of great help in facilitating the different activities of the LinkSFarM project after attending the project orientation where they were given the chance to find other markets.

It was difficult to convene a large number of farmers since they live far from each other. However, the presence of four ARB organizations in the Agrarian Reform Community of Bauko, namely: Bauko Organic Practitioners Credit Cooperative (BOPCC), Lagawa Credit Cooperative (LCC), Miliganian Services for Livelihood Credit Cooperative (MSL CC), and Bagnen-Balintaugan Timпойog Credit Cooperative (BBTCCO) helped a great deal.

Nora, the manager of BOPCC, was instrumental in her barangay to convince farmers to join the LinkSFarM Project. Her involvement facilitated the successful coordination and attendance of farmers in various project activities resulting to 687 registered farmers, of which 383 farmers were grouped into 25 clusters.

Cluster officers were also selected in these activities. They were trained with various technical capabilities on agro-enterprise development, good agricultural practices on production, postharvest management, value addition, and organic farming.

Farmers learned that production should be market driven and not limited to what they know. Studying new technology should be a continuous activity. Crop insurance program orientation was also incorporated in the different activities and farmers applied for the same after.

These ARBOs are members of a site working group (SWG) where they provide credit services to registered farmers. They considered these organizations as centers of information and development where they could be united. The officers and management staff with their facilities helped in facilitating all the activities of LinkSFarM.

Considering the marketability, volume, demand and existing crops of farmers, the clustered members selected their priority commodities for collective marketing. Four vegetable commodities, lettuce, potato, sayote and tomato, were prioritized for collective marketing. These products were later changed to lettuce and pechay after the meeting of the SWG and local research team (LRT) with the buyers. These buyers encouraged the farmers to produce the two vegetables because of high market demand and its potential to command a fixed price.

The LRT, led by Nora, returned to their respective clusters and informed members of the good news. At this juncture, they learned how to prepare production modules where each member learned to compute cost and income and determine the break-even price and break-even volume.

This tool proved helpful for the farmers to establish standard farming practices as well as pricing and costing. With the market demand from the two buyers, farmers were guided in the preparation of a supply plan and given seeds to plant.

They began planting in the month of September for a December harvest. But the farmers faced a challenge right when the produce were ready. Typhoon Ompong ravaged their farms and left all their crops devastated. Thanks to crop insurance that some farmers availed, they were able to recoup some of their investment and start anew.

However, one of the buyers couldn't wait for the farmers' delivery any longer

and withdrew.

Nora persisted in convincing the LRT to find other markets for their new produce. Another study was conducted and found new outlets.

With this fresh requirement, the AEF, in coordination with the Office of Municipal Agriculture, conducted training on organic farming for farmers who still practiced conventional cropping. Nora, with some of her members, helped in facilitating these trainings which included preparation of fermented fruit juice, fermented plant juice, indigenous microorganism, organic pesticide, and fungicide as inputs of production. These are used to replace expensive commercial counterparts.

"It is time to repair the destroyed environment to produce safe and healthy food that will be served in the table for every Filipino," said one of the facilitators.

During the course of the training, the buyers required the monitoring of the farms to ensure the quality of the products. Buyers would personally visit the farms and test the soil and produce before they are cleared as cluster-member suppliers. Continuous orders would be made from farms who pass these tests.

Armed with the technology and commitment from the buyers, farmers were ready to face the challenge to shift from conventional to organic farming.

Policies and agreements on membership, production, finances,

consolidation, packaging, marketing and cluster savings were made with every cluster to unify each group. Cluster meetings were conducted by respective leaders to closely monitor production and ensure that agreements made with buyers are fulfilled. Problems on capital were also threshed out. In additional, Nora coordinated with Cordillera Network which provided a P200,000-loan for the farmers at a minimal interest of 1% monthly. The payment was agreed to be deducted from cluster members' weekly sales until fully paid.

Nora and her pioneer members were distributed to different clusters as leaders. They shared new technology on the harvesting of lettuce. They also ensured that consolidation centers were established in different barangays for the easier pickup of products. Validations were also made before harvest to confirm the number produce.

About 50 days after planting, the first batch of cluster members, composed of 17 farmers, were able to deliver 5,400 kilograms

of vegetables to a buyer that supplied a major mall in Metro Manila. A second delivery of 240 kilograms from eight cluster members was made for a buyer in Buguais, Benguet, followed by three more successful transactions with different customers.

The experience of six clustered farmers showed a remarkable impact

as shown by their cluster sales and net income. Their practice should be sustained and supported fully to inspire other farmers who are reluctant to embrace organic farming technology that will provide better income.

The LinkSFarM project with the help of Nora and her fellow cluster leaders revived the hopes of farmers of Bauko. The support of a strong and persistent farmer leader in Nora, with the guidance of the AEFs, opened the doors of opportunity where farmers realized that there is money in organic farming. The crisis that Nora experienced after typhoon Ompong turned into opportunity. "In every crisis, there is opportunity," she said. 🌱

**This is better than what we experience in conventional vegetable production. Many times, we go home after selling our products with our hearts broken.**



# 'Gabi' turns once sleepy village vibrant

By Paula Lorenz Rodriguez



In Bicol region, elephant ear plant or gabi is a popular dish. Yet, many of the Bicolanos take it lightly, which grows everywhere in large quantity, preferably in rich, moist soil in the backyard, edges of the farms and even along the side streets.

Not anymore, at least to Vicente Nopre, the former chairman of Barangay Sagurong, Pili, Camarines Sur, and to his fellow farmers. The plant they used to look down upon turned out to be a gold mine in waiting.

Like his fellow farmers, Vic, as he is fondly called, is more preoccupied tilling his palay farm and wait for three to four months before savoring the fruits of his labor.

"Life of a palay farmers is hard. While waiting for three to four months before harvest time, you need to look for odd jobs, which come along only occasionally," Vic laments.

One sunny afternoon, Vic visited the Sagurong Barangay Hall to inquire about any agricultural projects in 2018. It was then he heard about the not-so-familiar "Linksfarm."

Linksfarm is a value-chain approach that the DAR has been introducing to various agrarian reform communities, with the end in view of increasing the farmers' income by organizing them into a solid organization, pool their harvests together and link them up directly to potential markets. The idea is to eliminate the third-party traders or middlemen, who usually take advantage of

the farmers by buying their products at a low price and sells them at profitable price.

Some of his fellow farmers took it with a grain of salt, still preferring to sell their harvests on their own, thinking that they could demand much higher price that way.

Vic, however, gave it a try. Known among his fellow farmers as a man with firm resolved

to succeed, they reluctantly joined him. The farmer-participants were clustered into three groups, each was composed of 12 members. Vic was voted as the leader of his group. They were introduced to the so-called "eight-step agro-enterprise journey."

It demonstrates the need for all members to work as one, each with a role to play, for the group to succeed.

Among the products that the groups intend to pursue, rice was listed first, followed by corn and gabi.

Since gabi is growing in abundance in their community, Vic's group chose it as the crop to sell, fresh and dried.

Some of their members, however, were less enthusiastic about it. A certain Efanias was overheard as saying: "Gabi leaves is hard to peddle in the market at P10 a bundle."

But Vic prevailed upon them to give it a try. "We have nothing to lose," Vic told them.

With the help of agro-enterprise facilitators identified only as Paula, Jania, and Natoy, the group took their first step: Identify the potential

markets.

Guided by their facilitators, they conducted market matching

with invited potential institutional buyers from hotels, restaurants, pasalubong centers and hospitals, asking about their preferences in volume and quality standards and mode of payment. It was meant to enhance their confidence in dealing directly with buyers.

Graceland Restaurant was the first to show interest to the delight of the farmers. But their excitement melted away as the management requires numerous documents: Official receipts, farms' map, farmers' organizational profile and sanitary permit.

Securing all those documents was a big blow as the farmers' group was not prepared for it even as Graceland's buying price was fairly high. Besides, it only intended to buy five kilos of dried gabi a week.

Instead of sulking in one corner, Vic's group remained steadfast and sought an audience with the RPM Pili Nut, another potential buyer. This time, it managed to close a deal of supplying RPM 100 kilos of dried gabi at P150 a kilo every other week. However, the large volume turned out to be a cause for alarm to some doubting Thomases.

Vic, however, was quick to calm them down. "We can make it. All that we need to do is to expand our gabi plantation," he says.

Inadequate water, however, resulted to their gabi plants producing leaves the size of a palm. With good amount of water, a gabi plant can produce a leaf as big as the upper

body of a medium-built man.

Vic's group sounded an SOS to other farmers' clusters. But even with their contribution, they

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It demonstrates the need for all members to work as one, each with a role to play, for the group to succeed.

could only deliver 52.6 of quality dried gabi. RPM owner, Avelina Miranda, took them anyway. Though the group experienced return of rejected dried gabi leaves, it quickly resolved the problem with the help of the agro-enterprise facilitators and one Edison Petalie, who provided them hands-on post-harvest handling training of dried Gabi leaves.

Soon, Vic's group became a by-word in the hotel and restaurant industry. Besides RPM Pili Nut, which has become their regular customer, the Villa Caceres Hotel also knocked on its door for an order of dried gabi leaves. And the customers are just keep on coming.

Today, farmers in Barangay Sagurong, Pili, Camarines Sur are still busy with their respective palay farms, it being their major staple. But every available spaces are now planted with gabi as the farmers even from different clusters have forged a collective agreement to consolidate their dried gabi to meet the growing demand. Yes, the plant they once looked down upon has become their bread and butter. 🌱



# Farmers' cooperative in Negros Occ. makes headway, thanks to LinkSFarm



*"It doesn't matter who you are, or where you come from. The ability to triumph begins with you. Always," says celebrity icon Oprah Winfrey.*

Marilyn Deita usually starts her day in the fields of Mulawin Lanatan Farmers Multi-Purpose Cooperative (MLFMPC). She is an agrarian reform beneficiary, working for the cooperative as a bookkeeper since its inception in January 2004.

In 2017, the cooperative was granted a water system by Sagay City Mayor Alfredo D. Marañon III after its members underwent vegetable gardening lessons in the farm business school project of the DAR. While vegetable farming offers great opportunities, it did them too little as they were lacking technical know-how in marketing, accounting and

bookkeeping.

In June 2018, the DAR introduced LinkSFarm project or "Linking Small Holder Farmers to market. The group headed by cooperative chairman Edelido Calanza took it as a timely intervention.

"The project came just at the right moment to address our perennial problem, that is, the marketing of our harvests and the enhancement of our business acumen," Calanza says.

After the marketing session, the MLFMPC members realized that they have long been taken advantage by unscrupulous traders who are buying their harvests at very low price while selling them at very profitable price.

"How frustrating it is to learn that traders had been profiting too

much from our harvests while we settled for crumbs," Deita laments.

Looking for marketing outlets for their produce is a common problem among the farmers in the absence of market information and linkages, which the LinkSFarm project is trying to resolve.

During cluster formation, the MLFMPC has formed three (3) clusters out of 34 members – the Green Plants, Power Plants and Cosmos Plants. Clustering was based on the proximity of the members to each other for easier communication and to encourage them to participate actively. Clusters formed were Green Plants, Power Plants and Cosmos Plants.

Deita, fondly called by peers as Manang Marilyn, was unanimously elected as Treasurer of the Cosmos Plants. Among the crops they preferred to plants, according to popularity, were pepper, squash, ampalaya, eggplant, okra and beans. Pepper was the popular choice because it commands higher price and has greater demand.

After familiarizing themselves to production module, supply plan and basic accounting courses, the clustered of farmers embarked on their newfound learnings, with a battlecry: "Production Module o kay hirap mong gawin at nakakaduling, pero sa iyo ako'y maraming aanihin."

On July 25, 2018, Manang Marilyn's group chose the public market of Bacolod City as their first stop. The team conducted interviews. They learned that most vegetables there came from as far as the Southern part of Negros Occidental and Cagayan de Oro.

To find out how far they understand the project, a mock interview among farmers were conducted by the agro-enterprise facilitators and they were satisfied with how they responded particularly in the proper way of dealing with customers.

The real test came when an actual interview with institutional market, Negrense Volunteers for Change Foundation, a non-government

organization, which seeks to help eliminate malnutrition and extend relief goods to calamity-stricken communities.

Foundation manager Luisito Lacson told them that "our buying price here is based on the current market price, if not a little higher."

Among the crops that the foundation usually buy in large volume are squash, mungbean, green leafy vegetables, rice, orange, camote, cardava banana and green mangoes as their main ingredients of their products. The demand for squash was the highest among the crops, from 850 kilograms to 1.3 tons. Next was pepper at 700 kilograms. Buyers and traders paid the commodities either on consignment or cash on delivery.

With the information gathered, the MLFMPC cluster members went home, smiling from ear to ear, eager to put into action what they had learned from the project.

On January 11, 2019, the cooperative members held a meeting, during which they set their commitment to supply the vegetable requirements of the NVC Foundation.

At the Sagay City public market, the MLFMPC has also linked up with traders and committed itself to be one of its suppliers of vegetables

Having already established its market outlets, the MLFMPC expanded their vegetable farms and was already thinking of adding bell pepper among the crops it intends to plant.

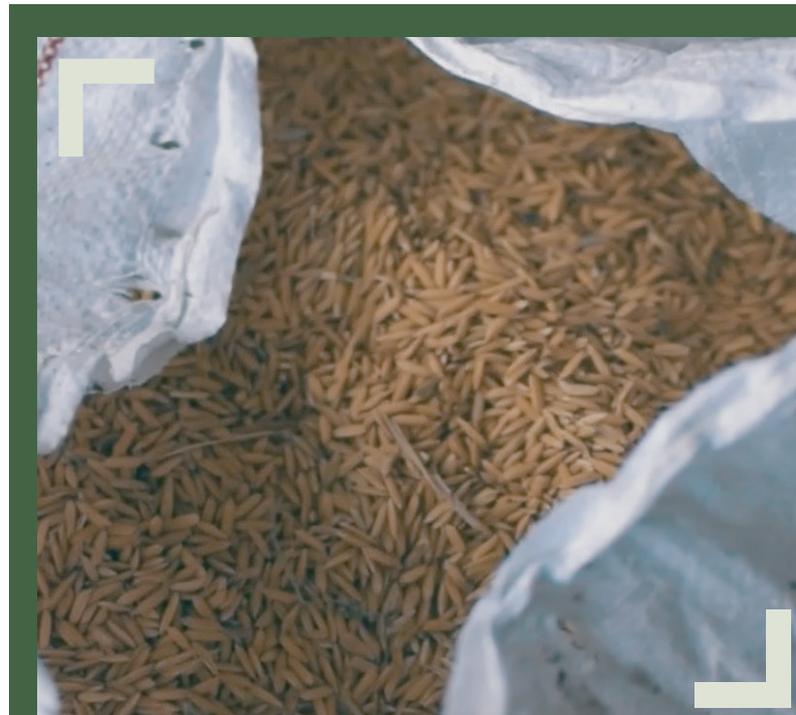
Gone were the days when they used to just wait for traders to buy their harvest at very low price. They are now doing it themselves and the results are just mind-blowing. 🌱

**How frustrating it is to learn that traders had been profiting too much from our harvests while we settled for crumbs.**



# Agri-Entrepreneurs are not Born

As told to Braulio E. Dujali, Davao Del Norte, Region XI



I own the land; I till the soil and I know when to harvest. But I am uncertain of my income and I can't help but cry.

I am Ligaya Eugenio, a 68-year-old widow and mother of seven. I am a member of the Dujali Free Farmers Multi-Purpose Cooperative (DUFFAMPCO), an Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organization (ARBO) assisted by the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in Barangay Dujali, Braulio E. Dujali, Davao del Norte.

My rice farm is situated in a geographically-isolated and disadvantaged area, with clogged canals everywhere. I remember the time when I could barely make both ends meet because of middlemen. I lose up to 20 percent of my income because of debts I've accumulated borrowing from traders. I couldn't afford to hire laborers to do the farm activities. Flooding was another problem. Whenever water overflowed from the Tuganay River, stored crops suffer from spoilage and the planted rice are damaged. A farmer's loss was always difficult to recover.

Some government support reached us then but it has always been inconsistent. Farmers have learned not to expect from

authorities anymore. This is but a common plight for rice farmers. Nothing comes out of all our hard work. It is sad to get almost nothing of what I truly deserve. I put all this effort into farming only to sell our produce at a very low price.

Instead of thinking negatively, I acted on my problems and took a risk to lessen negotiations with traders.

Gemma Bacurayo, manager of DUFFAMPCO, invited me to join the Linking Smallholder Farmers to Market (LinkSFarM) project of the DAR. It was a program which aims to increase a farmer's agricultural productivity and effectively manage their agricultural production by applying value chain processes and linking them with institutional market buyers.

I doubted it at first. I was hesitant to learn something new. Maybe it's a waste of time and effort, I thought.

When the registration was conducted, I filled in the form anyway and was chosen as a cluster leader two days later. Together with other farmers, I was trained in making production modules, value chain diagrams, market chain maps, and supply plans. I made

sure that all my cluster members attended every meeting and group discussion.

I attended various technology transfers such as trainings and seminars. I facilitated a meeting together with my cluster members. We gathered as a small group and discussed what to prepare for the activity. I divided my members into three groups and assigned a task to each one before going to the markets. We have agreed to conduct interviews with the Molave Hotel, the Medical Mission Group of Hospitals and the Cambial Store, all in Tagum City. We have learned from a reliable source that these markets need a rice supplier.

I reminded my team members to take heed of important details when conducting the market chain study. I prepared a buyer comparison matrix to be filled in. They were also taught to properly collect

identifying important questions and points about the product quality. I shared these and the rest of my learnings to our group.

The local government unit and the DAR encouraged farmers to adopt the program to boost our income. They helped us solve our problems in bridging our farms directly to the market. Before, only middlemen knew who are potential buyers were. Hence, the chance of being short charged was greater. We were offered less of what we expect to receive. We were also warned by these middleman that there was only one buyer who offered the "highest" price while others offered less. We could not do anything since



Perhaps, our suffering would not last long with the help of LinkSFarM. The time has come to earn what we, as farmers, deserve.

## Agri-Entrepreneurs are not Born

we did not know the buyers of our crop. Our only choice was to accept the offer given to us.

Perhaps, our suffering would not last long with the help of LinkSFaRM. Selling products direct to the markets would allow us to find their true market value. The time has come to earn what we, as farmers, deserve.

I smile as I see my fellow farmers appreciate the DAR for the Linksfarm program because of its importance to our survival. I was trained and empowered with the ability to deal with varied growing seasons, climatic variations, soil conditions, and the often-harsh

catastrophic events of drought and floods. I was also trained in pest and disease management, financial literacy education, and postharvest handling. As a fruit of this toil, I sold 320 sacks of rice amounting to P544,000 pesos to DUFFAMPCO which delivered our products to Medical Mission Group Hospital and Health Services Cooperative of Tagum (MMGHSCT), our new market-partner.

With LinkSFaRM, my life has changed and keeps improving for the better. Women like me will never cry anymore because if we try different ways to be successful, the odds are that you will eventually find the right one for you, at the right time. 🌱



# Mani is Money



By: Mary Jean P. Obeso

IN the island of Negros, about 90 kilometers from Bacolod City, lies Kabankalan City, the Rising Sun of Southern Negros Occidental. Its tropical climate makes the city suitable for farming with sugarcane as the major crop. Some farmers even converted their rice fields to sugarcane lands. But done without consideration of soil types and geographic location, this resulted to low yielding performance of the crop.

Raul Bugtong is considered a veteran farmer. Born to sugarcane farmers, he used to help his father in the farm after school and whenever there were no classes. When he started his

own family in 1990, farming became his source of income.

Sugarcane planting was a lot better when the industry was at its height. Negros planters towered above Philippine society and their workers earned enough for their family or even more. But fate took a sharp turn. In the 80's, the sugar industry took a deep dive. Raul and other small sugarcane planters suffered the most when the price of sugar in the market went down and became unstable. It set off a chain reaction of problems in the provinces which included extreme poverty and malnutrition.

# Mani is Money

A new decade came with new challenges. The cost of production inputs, like fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, increased. Raul began to feel hopeless. He felt that it was the end of the road for him as a farmer, more so, because his farm was extremely remote. With rough roads and without a dependable public transportation to and from his place, hauling of his product to the market was very costly. More years went by; many men in their locality had gone to the city proper in search of work as construction workers or domestic helpers. Come harvest, there were only a few left to hire.

Raul had always been a good father; he worked hard to make sure that his family never missed a meal. That period was a long test of resilience. He continued to till the land but thought it had become futile. Since then, planted different crops, corn, palay, and root crops, for the family's sustenance.

Seeing the problems that the small sugarcane planters are experiencing, the Linking Smallholder Farmers to Market (LinkSFarM) project was brought to Kabankalan City. The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) Provincial Office sent a letter to an agrarian reform

beneficiaries organization (ARBO), the TampaloHn Smallholder Farmers Agrarian Reform Cooperative to conduct an orientation about the project.

The cooperative, then, sent an invitation letter to all the community leaders. This included Raul, president of Nasalayan Small Farmers Association (NASFA) and purok chairman.

Upon hearing what the project was all about, Raul did not spare a second thought on joining. He knew that the losses he had suffered from planting sugarcane and corn were because of the production inputs and post-harvest expenses like hauling and hiring tapaseros (laborers who cut the sugarcanes and load them in the trucks). Even then he saw the lifeline offered them. He was hopeful that through the LinkSFarM project, it would be easier and less expensive to bring their produce to the market. He was confident that a sure market would be waiting for them at the end of the program. These thoughts alone created a sparkle in his eyes that had been enveloped with helplessness and hopelessness for years.

However, during the orientation, many sugarcane farmers were skeptical. They were mono-crop practitioners and were



afraid to venture into peanuts as suggested in the activity. The farmers' hesitations came from their actual experience. Some who had already tried planting peanut before failed to earn good income from it. One of the said, "Wala kami baligya-an nga maayo nga buyer. Tapos kon magsukbanay, daku-daku ila sako. Ti, pierde kami (We do not have a good buyer and, in terms of packing, they use very large sacks so we are at a loss)."

Another exclaimed, "Kami ya, wala sigurado nga baligyaan kag nabudlayan kami magdala o maghakot sang amon produkto pakadto sa banwa (We do not have reliable buyers and it is difficult to bring our product to the town market)."

However, through Raul's strong leadership and influence, he was able to convince other farmers to give LinkSFarM a chance. Their group, composed of ten members, was one of the clusters formed within the baranagay.

With a voice full of emotion and sincerity, he said, "Nakperyensyahan ta gid kon ano kabudlay magtanum sang tubo kag

ang kalawigon sa paghulat na matapas ini kag madala sa central. Tapos, pagtapas, sumahon ta, kulang pa ipamayad aton income sa mga gasto ta (We've experienced how hard it is for us to rely on sugarcane alone and the long duration before it could be cut and hauled to the sugar central. Then, our earning is not even enough to pay and cover all the expense we incurred)."

Through Raul's strong leadership and influence, he was able to convince other farmers to give LinkSFarM a chance.



# Mani is Money

For these new peanut growers, changing their crops and old beliefs is not an easy task. But it paved the way in gaining new knowledge.

*“Risguhan ta ni ah kay ara ang DAR LinkSFarM nga mabulig sa aton batok sa mga malain ta nga eksperyensya nga nagpadudla sa aton magtanum mani. Ara ang proyekto sang DAR nga mabulig sa aton maka-ganar samtang nagahulat sang tubo (We will take a risk because DAR LinkSFarM is there to help us combat those unpleasant experiences we had planting peanut. The project is there to help us earn while waiting for the harvest of sugarcane),”* he added.

On the other hand, to expand the coverage of beneficiaries and recipients of the project, an orientation was conducted in the neighboring barangays within the city. The training explained the demand and marketability of peanut in the country as well as investment opportunities of the products developed from peanuts. This was strengthened by Raul’s testimony, relating his personal experiences and the support of the Kabankalan City Government. This made it easier to convince the farmers to join and form their own clusters. All in all, thirty (30) clusters were formed in the city with a total to 325 clustered members.

In the advent of the implementation of the project, series of trainings were conducted to capacitate the farmers, honing them to acquire knowledge on leadership, management, governance, and skills on collective marketing.

Alas! Another concern cropped up

during one of the clusters meetings. The seeds. *“Diin kami makuha binhi? (Where can we get the seeds?)* one member asked.

Raul decided to use his meager savings to buy the seeds himself. He went to a nearby barangay and bought 8 gantas of ginarangan seeds, a locally demanded variety. He took the risk of planting peanut in his 0.32 hectares of land and intercropped it in his corn plantation. Then, his worries shifted to the weather and irrigation.

One sunny morning, while visiting his farm, he was glad see that at least eighty percent of the seeds had grown. It was far more than he expected.

During the first harvest in February 2019, Raul was astonished to see how productive peanut can be. His smile and excitement could not be contained. Though the peanut was only intercropped with corn, he was able to produce 10 sacks (100

times of the seeds he sown). He gave two sacks as share to those who harvested, he kept two more sacks as seeds for the next cropping, and sold the rest of the six. He earned P 6,030.00 in less than four months.

But with corn he suffered a loss of P940.00 in the same area. If the same area was planted with sugarcane, he would earn a net income of roughly P10,000.00 in a twelve-month period. Dedicating the entire plot for a whole year to peanut farming would yield more income, he thought. This was how he finally convinced himself and the rest of the farmers who still harbored doubts to embrace the project completely.

For these new peanut growers, changing their crops and old beliefs is not an easy task. But it paved the way in gaining new knowledge.

*“Gina lantaw ko gid nga daku gid ang mabulig indi lang sa amon pamilya kundi pati na sa komunidad (I am looking*

forward that this would be a big help not only to our family but to the community as well),” Raul said.

*“Tapos, sa mga kababaihan daku man mabulig sini kay kon daku na amon produksyon, makahimo kami produkto, parehas sang peanut butter (This could also help the women in the community because if we have a lot of produce, we can make products like peanut butter),”* he added.

For Raul and the rest of the farmer members, they will continue to persevere and pursue success together until they achieve their dreams of wealth and opportunity. They also plan to share the knowledge and skills LinkSFarM has taught them to the next generation and the generations to come, molding them of becoming Agro-entrepreneurs.

Indeed, quoting one farmer saying, *“may money sa mani (there is money in peanut).”* 🌱



# If at first you don't succeed, try and try again... the Lantapan farmers' way



BRENDA Cabigquez, a farmer leader of Block II, Kaatuan, Lantapan, Bukidnon, is a sayote, potato and coffee farmer and a farmer facilitator rolled into one.

More than just being a farmer, she is also the chairman of Block II Kaatuan Multipurpose Cooperative.

These multi-tasks that she is attending to has opened her eyes about the many problems that she and her members are facing every day.

"Going to our place in Block II, Kaatuan, Lantapan, Bukidnon alone is a daily ordeal for all of us. It's very remote and inaccessible to transportation, communication and infrastructure development. The most convenient mode of transportation to get to our place is the habal-habal," she says.

"We actually feel our government has forgotten about us. One can actually swim

in our road going to our barangay during rainy season because it is often flooded," she adds.

No wonder everybody rejoiced when the DAR picked the Municipality of Lantapan, specifically the Block II Farmers Multipurpose Cooperative in Kaatuan, Lantapan, Bukidnon as the recipient of the Linking Smallholder Farmers Market (LinkSFarM) Project. More than 100 farmers showed up during the project orientation in July 2019.

"When we started attending the Farmers Facilitators Training I, I was chosen as the leader of the community. I knew it was not an easy task because it needs our time and patience," she recalls.

By September 2018, we were tasked to help the agro-enterprise facilitators to gather the farmers in our area, form them into clusters with 10-15 members, and immediately select three major products in our area.

As expected, sayote, potato and coffee topped the list. Sayote grows in abundance in Lantapan, almost 80% of the farmers of Block II has an area of at least 2,400 square meters of sayote farm.

"Almost everyone in Block II is planting sayote. You only need to plant once and after 8 months you can harvest every week. In fact, during harvest seasons you could hardly call

the farmers to a meeting because they are all busy harvesting their crops. The good thing about it was that we still made it with flying colors," Cabigquez says.

The next challenge was to look for market opportunities. Before year 2018 ended, however, the market chain study for sayote did not materialize. There were simply no takers for their sayote

"We had difficulty looking for a market for our study because we have been into sayote production for so long that we already saturated the market in Cagayan de Oro and Bukidnon," Cabigquez says.

So, they tried the second crop, potato. About 90 farmers, grouped into eight clusters, planned to plant potato in the first semester of 2019. But luck seemed not on their side as the dry spell lasted until April 2019.

But they still persisted and turned to the third crop, green coffee bean, which grew bountifully in their area. However, there was only one big buyer of their coffee beans, the Monastery of the Transfiguration, which bought it between P110 and P115 a kilo.

"We decided to re-assess the available green coffee beans in our community and look for market outlets," Cabigquez recalls.

The group roasted coffee beans of

I've been a coffee grower for a long time, but it is only now that I realize there's a big demand for it.

selected farmers for sample products and delivered them to processors in Malaybalay and Cagayan de Oro. This time, their efforts paid off. Those who tried their coffee were impressed by its distinct taste.

Experts taught the farmers the proper way of harvesting their coffee bean to maintain its

quality.

The Block II did not have to go far and wide for buyers as traders visited them to make direct orders at P180 to P200 a kilo, depending on the quality of the beans.

More than 300 kilos of coffee beans were sold just for the Month of February and March from just 15 member-farmers.

"I've been a coffee grower for a long time, but it is only now that I realize there's a big demand for it," Cabigquez says.

While lady luck finally smiled on them with their green coffee beans, the Block II farmers did not give up on their sayote and potato. they continued harnessing them, hopeful they will find the right market for them.

"I firmly believe that time will come that our sayotes and potatoes will flourish the same way as our green coffee beans. We just need to be patient. It's not going to be easy but we are willing to take our chances no matter what," she says. ☺



# What is LinkSFarMM

THE Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) through the Bureau of Agrarian Reform Beneficiary Development (BARBD) and in partnership with the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has been implementing Linking Smallholder Farmers to Markets (LinkSFarM) since 2011.

The project seeks to improve various agri-based livelihood of agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARB) and smallholder farming households (SHF) by developing their farm enterprise.

Its first phase, “Linking ARBs to Corporate Supply Chains,” was implemented from 2011-2014. Meanwhile, in June of 2019, the DAR expanded the LinkSFarM program to include micro-finance to its core mission of agro-enterprise development (AED), capacity development, provision of small rural infrastructure, and establishment learning hubs.

This version is now rebranded as LinkSFarMM and continues to enlist various stakeholders of agro-enterprise development to help uplift the lives of ARBs, smallholder farmers, and farmer

organizations.

The AED component of LinksFarMM is pursued to provide farmers cooperatives and organizations with better access and link to corporate markets. It is conducted by organizing farmers into barangay-based small groups and are assisted to access greater value in the market chain through coordinated production program and collective marketing of their products.

The CRS organizes small groups of 10 to 15 ARBs, smallholder farmers and rural women, who will share production information, obtain loans for their production needs, consolidate their produce, negotiate prices, and collectively market their crops to appropriate buyers through their cooperatives or organizations.

Farmers in need of financial assistance are aided through the Agri-Credit, Microfinance Development and Risk Management project of LinksFarMM. Through this project, financing needs of the ARBs and non-ARBs for the implementation of their production plans and cooperatives’ marketing supply plans are linked with



financing institutions.

To help farmers increase their income, LinkSFarMM provides small rural infrastructure for production, post-production and value addition of agri-products. These include solar dryers (for coffee, abaca, copra, etc), storage facilities for crops, and building facilities. Value addition is another way of increasing farmers’ income through the refinement of their food products by teaching farmers techniques in food preparation, cooking and packaging.

LinkSFarM also facilitates training, mentoring and coaching to farmers and field facilitators under its Capability Development component. This project enables the delivery of appropriate technical guidance through training, coaching and mentoring, and provide resource materials to ensure the mobilization and strengthening of new and existing pool of AED trainers and facilitators.

Apart from a strong learning agenda, LinkSFarM established AED learning hubs to continually provide knowledge to

farmers and AED trainers and facilitators. This is where good practices are shared between farmers and learnings on business and farming are taught by experts.



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