

BUILDING ORGANIC INSTITUTIONS: MOBILIZING LOCAL VILLAGE COUNCILS

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Summary

Beyond capacity building for farmers, organic agriculture (OA) can grow sustainably by also building the capacity of local village institutions. We present strategies and success factors in organizing local Village Councils (VC) which serve as entry points and as partners in building community-based organic bridges among farmers, local government units and national programs.

Key words: community organizing, village councils, vermicomposting

Background

Republic Act 10068 or the Organic Agriculture Act (OAA) of the Philippines came into law in April 2010. Thus organic agriculture initiated by small private groups in the mid-1990s in the Philippines is now mainstreamed into national agriculture programs.

Since 2007, three years before the OAA was passed, the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) partnered with various national, regional and provincial government agencies to organize smallholder organic farmers' associations with involvement of their local municipal governments to promote sustainable organic vegetable production and marketing in Southern Luzon, Philippines. Active members of organic farmers' groups were trained as Farmer Trainers so that they can lead fellow farmers in neighboring farms and villages. They have continued to strengthen linkages with the private sector, customers and market outlets. The Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) that the project initiated resulted to a community-based group certification system that is affordable and practical for smallholders yet ensures quality of their organic products.

One constraint though was the lack of organic fertilizers to meet the increase in crop production. We then piloted the production of vermicompost by organizing members of the Village Council through a "pay forward worm dispersal" system.

Mobilizing Local Village Councils

The Village Council ("*Sangguniang Barangay*" in Filipino) is the smallest legislative unit of government in the Philippines. It consists of an elected Village Head ("*Barangay Captain*") and seven Councillors ("*Kagawad*") each of whom is assigned to Chair a Committee including agriculture support services; health, social welfare and sanitation; justice, peace and order; infrastructure, information and reading center; and youth concerns.

From 47 rural villages of the City of Tayabas, Quezon, we organized all Councillors assigned as Chair of the local Agriculture Committee per village. The organization was

named LIKAS PO (Filipino term literally meaning “nature”), the acronym for “League of Councillors of Agriculture Committees for Organic Farming”). The members elected their officers and we helped them register under the Securities and Exchange Commission. This gives them a legal personality that shall be enable them to access government services and funds.

To be able to respond to the need of organic farmers for more organic fertilizers, we trained LIKAS PO members (who mostly are also rice farmers) on organic agriculture and on vermicompost production in their backyards. An initial five interested members prepared vermi bins using readily available substrates like cow manure, rice straw and banana stalks. Two weeks later, we provided a “loan” of 1 kg worms per member. After 3-4 months when the worm population have considerably increased, they were required to “pay forward” 1 kg of worms to another batch of interested members. Some months later, this system has grown to 14 recipients.

Other LIKAS PO members also wanted to try but had constraints like the distance from sources of raw materials and that because they were busy with their duties as Village Councillors have little spare time to attend to individual vermi bins. Through group discussions they decided to set up a communal vermicomposting area. One member offered her backyard. She had the extra space and owns several cows to produce the manure. Since they meet monthly for their regular meetings, they agreed to hold the meetings in the afternoons so that in the mornings they can all work together in their communal vermi bins. They agreed that each member should bring raw materials for the bins as they come to their monthly meetings. In such days, some members involved themselves in the harvesting and packing of vermicompost while others prepared the layered substrates in the bins. The final part of their monthly meetings is the traditional socialization with “lambanog” (a local distilled coconut toddy) during which they informally “monitor and evaluate” their vermicomposting and brainstorm other concerns of their organization.

Success indicators

LIKAS PO is now earning income from the sale of worms and vermicompost from the communal production. Discounts are given to local farmers within their villages and further discounts are enjoyed by LIKAS PO members. The demand from neighboring towns has encouraged them to expand their operation. As a group it was easy for them to request galvanized iron roofing from the town Mayor to protect the vermi bins from inclement weather. Our project provided both construction and information materials for LIKAS PO to set up a simple training center near the vermi bins because of the growing interest of villagers to learn about vermicomposting, too. LIKAS PO is now submitting a vermicomposting proposal as an income-generating livelihood project to the Department of Labor and Employment. Their target is to meet the demand for organic fertilizers, earn some income and also create job opportunities for the out-of-school rural youth.

At the individual level, members producing their own vermicompost used it in their own rice fields. They were so pleased with the crop growth they did not want to sell anymore. While this was not the original intention, it is also good because they actually now belong to the increasing number of farmers converting to organic agriculture. They have also added more vermi bins. As Village Councillors, they are also setting a good example to

their fellow farmers and villagers. The “pay forward worm dispersal system” assured the source of worms even if our project has left. Farmers no longer burn their rice straw (thus reduced greenhouse gas emission) and cow dung is now being collected as substrate for the worms.

Core Message and Conclusions

Organizing Village Councillors is a good first step towards building institutions that can advocate for organic agriculture at the grassroots. A typical Village Councillor has strong leadership potential. Being elected members of Village Councils, they command respect and influence in the village. They are mandated by law to create resolutions and local ordinances. They have a “voice” in the planning of and budget allocation for development programs in the village. They can build strong partnerships with farmers and organizations within their village. Through LIKAS PO it is now easy to “build organic bridges” across villages. We foresee to build LIKAS PO “chapters” in every town in the country. It will have an assured growing membership because by law, elections for Village Councils are held every three years, thus providing fresh potential members. Current LIKAS PO members decided they will continue to be active in LIKAS PO even if their 3-year term in the Village Council has ended. They have written in their by-laws that future members of LIKAS PO could be former village councillors or newly elected ones. If supported properly, they are a big potential “bridge building” institution to grow sustainable organic agriculture in the Philippines.

References

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