

Building organic bridges between traditional systems and the future

Title: Organic agriculture in Palimbang

Subtitle: *Reviving the bayanihan spirit for food and peace*

Author's Name and Background

Reagan Pilar is an organic farmer, trainer and the Vice-Chairman of the Association of Sustainable Agriculture Practitioners of Palimbang (ASAPP).

Summary

Organic farmers in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat helped revived the old culture of *bayanihan* (collective action) to ensure food security in the community. From using chemical seeds and inputs, farmers are now successful harvesting enough yields for their consumption, as well as surplus products that they market within and outside the community.

Background

Bayanihan ("being a community" in Filipino) is an old Filipino tradition and value of collective work and action buoyed by the spirit of communal unity and cooperation. Back in the days, *bayanihan* is often seen and practiced by the community when someone has to transfer their house (a nipa hut) from one place to another, or during planting and harvesting rice, and helping the neighbours prepare for family affairs such as weddings and baptismal. However, progress and development has diminished the cultural traditions and beliefs of the farmers, including bayanihan.

The introduction of high-yielding rice varieties (HYVs) during the Green Revolution and the subsequent increase of chemical use rendered the bayanihan practice obsolete. Instead of the usual gathering and exchange of help and services, farmers are now able to perform these tasks just by using chemicals. were the tradition of helping each other was replaced with individualism and farmers focused on increasing yield instead of sustainability.

Main Chapter

The Association of Sustainable Agriculture Practitioners of Palimbang (ASAPP) is composed of farmers in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines who organized themselves to assert their basic rights and bring back the sustainable and wholistic farming system into their hands. The area is composed of Muslim and Christian people who in the past has figured in religious conflicts. Sultan Kudarat has also had its share of insurgency cases that disrupted not only the peace and order situation, but also its economic standing. In agriculture, the farmers are not naive of the developments outside their community and depends heavily on external source of farming inputs.

In 2005, after an orientation about MASIPAG (Farmer-Scientist Partnership for Development), ASAPP started organic farming and began selling their organic products within and outside their community, but more than increasing their income, the group brought the *bayanihan* spirit back.

The strong implementation of the sustainable agriculture program, leading to the revival of hope and collective action towards achieving the common goal of food security marks ASAPP as a unique and trailblazing organization in the MASIPAG network.

Both Christian and Muslim members unite for the eradication of hunger and poverty, and sustainable agriculture and bayanihan provided them the means to achieve this. The community seedbank has provided ASAPP members a whole year round supply of organic seeds – free of charge. The farmers were taught how to make their own organic fertilizers and pesticides using materials from within their farms and the community . Most of the members of ASAPP cultivate more than five hectares of agricultural land, which is relatively higher than the MASIPAG or even the national average which also means that they have higher labour cost.

To minimize labour costs, ASAPP started to calendar each members cropping schedule and planned for the activities of the organization. At planting, each members prepare themselves to help a co-member plant rice, the farm-owner only needs to prepare food for the day's activity. On one occasion, the Parish Priest joined them believing that what the farmers are doing is crucial step in attaining their goal as a group. A Muslim member cannot believe that such activity could still happen in their community, thinking of the conflict that haunted their community since he was young.

Bayanihan did not end in planting but in harvesting as well and even extends to the other activities of the members – like in the old days. A combination of organic farming techniques and technologies and lower labour costs, the organization boasts of 1.05 million PHP net sales in two cropping seasons in 2009 only from their organic rice marketing which is far better than when they were still selling ordinary rice. In 2010, however, they suffered a great loss after a rat infestation in two consecutive cropping seasons. One of the farmer said that he was still able to harvest 54 cavans of palay in one cropping and thinks that he was still lucky than the conventional farmers who harvested more than he have but are in debt because of loans from traders which they used to purchase seeds and other chemical agricultural inputs and to pay for labour.

Core Message and Conclusion

The farmers of ASAPP, and even the community of Palimbang has long experienced conflicts resulting perhaps not only from religious disputes, but from economic impoverishment as well. Cultural traditions have been shunned in favour of practices that are promised to bring higher incomes and better yields. Yet even these so-called modern technologies has failed to secure food self-sufficiency among the farmers and free them from debts and dependency.

With MASIPAG, Christian and Muslim farmers found a way to work together for food security and empowerment of their community. ASAPP has become one of the most successful peoples' organizations (PO) member of MASIPAG in terms of yields, marketing and organizing achievements.

In conclusion, sustainable organic agriculture not only paved the way for economic improvement of the farmers in Palimbang, it also served to revive the culture of *bayanihan* that has long been a defining character of the Filipino spirit and contributed to the peacekeeping efforts in the community.