

The dumingag experience



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THE DUMINGAG EXPERIENCE: A REFLECTION By Alfonso A. Tan I never had much information about organic agriculture and the principles behind it, until in October 2012 when I joined the conduct of ARC Level of Development Assessment (ALDA) in Dumingag town in Zamboanga del Sur. As a member of the regional monitoring team who is conducting ALDA, I came across two Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARB) organizations that discuss authoritatively about organic farming like it is the palm of their hands.

The two organizations -- the Dumingag Organic Farmers Association (DOFA) and the Dumingag Organic Farmers Credit and Savings Cooperative (DOFCSC) - turned out to be just two of the several farmer organizations in Dumingag who are organic farming practitioners. And the technology has been gaining ground since this particular local government innovation was introduced by the municipal mayor more than five years ago. My layman's understanding of organic farming then, was simply farming without the use of pesticides, herbicides or any artificial fertilizers.

I know it has good health benefits for our body because the farm produce are all-natural. It is environment-friendly too. Later on, I learned that there are also so-called "organic animals" or those that are not kept in cages and not fed with commercial available feeds, which are generally by-products of other animals. The internet offers several helpful definitions of Organic Agriculture. The Bureau of Plant Industry in Australia defines organic farming as "the production of food and fibre without the use of synthetic chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides or genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia says, organic farming promotes the sustainable health and productivity of the ecosystem - soil,

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plants, animals and people. Organic foods are farmed in an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible way, focusing on soil regeneration, water conservation and animal welfare. As far as local government innovations are concerned, I believe the organic farming technology as revolutionized in the town of Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur is one for the books.

Last year, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) awarded Dumingag as one of the five recipients of the “ One World Award” for its organic farming program. IFOAM is a leading world coalition on sustainable agriculture mainly composed of civil society organizations and social movements. Dumingag town is its only local government member. Started in 2008, the IFOAM award runs every two years to recognize organic farming initiatives that have made a difference in the area of sustainable development.

Dumingag is a second class municipality in the eastern part of the province of Zamboanga del Sur. It is composed of forty four --11 lowland and 33 upland-- barangays, with a total land area of 618. 50 square kilometers and a population of 46, 039 per 2007 census. Situated in the heartland of the Zamboanga peninsula and on the northwest portion of the fertile Salug Valley, Dumingag is bounded on the North by the municipality of Sergio Omena, Sr. ; on the East by the municipality of Mahayag; on the South by the municipalities of Sominot and Midsalip; and on the West by the municipality of Siayan, Zamboanga del Norte.

Dumingag was part of the municipality of Molave when it was created into a barrio in 1950. Dumingag was once a vast expanse of jungle and marshland,

the favorite habitat of wildlife. Its first inhabitants were the Subanens who came from coastal areas of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur. The success of Dumingag started with the revolutionary idea of Mayor Nacianceno M. Pacalioga Jr. , a former Maoist rebel in the 1980's who almost singlehandedly transform Dumingag town into what it is now.

After returning to the folds of law, Jun Pacalioga went tilling theirfamily-owned upland farm in 1995. His former comrades introduced him to organic farming, but at first, he was not persuaded. In the year 2000, a seminar on sustainable agriculture had somehow convinced him the beauty of organic farming. Pacalioga's visit to his former comrades' farms in Davao City has particularly impressed upon him the natural fertility of the soil that organic farming brings. Minus inorganic inputs, the farms produce crops free from pass-on toxicity.

The positive result from his own practice drove Pacalioga to advocate organic agriculture to other farmers, finding kindred spirits among local leaders of the Catholic Church. According to Mayor Pacalioga, bringing back the natural fertility of the farms and putting premium on maintaining soil health are centralgoalsof Dumingag's organic agriculture program. Long years of agrichemical use had tied farm productivity to the application of costly fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides that, in turn, killed earthworms and degraded soil fertility.

Likewise, the high cost of farming and declining farm production resulted in poor income for tillers. " People could barely meet basic necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter and hardly pay for basic social services, such aseducationand health," Mayor Nacianceno Pacalioga said. After he was

elected mayor in 2007, Pacalioga aggressively promoted organic farming. He also caused the passage of a local measure encouraging and endorsing the widespread adoption of the technology. The policy was not an easy-sell. Even some municipal officials did not buy the program at once.

It took them several months to be convinced of the merits of organic farming. Soon, Dumingag leaders were up against the national policy design that promoted instead the use of chemical fertilizers and the cultivation of genetically modified crops. To illustrate his point, Pacalioga turned down P2 million worth of chemical fertilizers offered by the Department of Agriculture (DA) for distribution to the farmers. At one time, he also rejected a grant of genetically modified rice seeds for dispersal in his municipality.

As one of his first priorities, Mayor Jun organized the Organic Farming (OF) team which is tasked to lead in the implementation of the organic farming program, especially education and advocacy. Likewise, he introduced community immersion wherein local officials, community leaders and different stakeholders went to the 44 barangays to campaign for the economic program on Sustainable Organic farming. Initially, those who shifted to organic farming grappled with a steep reduction in yield, although this was cushioned by the radical decrease in cost.

Several croppings later, as natural soil fertility improved, output went up. For rice, yield per hectare was at par with farms still applying agrichemicals at 95 65-kilo bags during the dry season, and 70 to 80 bags during the wet season. But net earnings are higher with organic farming because cost has been reduced by at least a third. From only 20 organic farmers in 2007, the number of organic agriculture practitioners in the municipality rose to about

500 by 2011, increasing by tenfold the size of farmlands cultivated along sustainable agriculture methods—from close to hundred hectares before to some 1, 000 hectares.

In upland villages, organic farming is gaining adherents among vegetable cultivators and livestock raisers. Today, rice farmers have produced 55 local organic varieties that ensure a stable seed bank. The Dumingag Organic Farming System Practitioners Association (DOFSPA) composed of active organic farming practitioners was also organized. They also formed a credit cooperative that could help better in raising capital for farming or in sharing the cost of farming failures due to calamities.

Their cooperative initially started in providing production loan to the organic farming practitioners and helps in accessing good market. The mayor's brainchild, the so-called Genuine People's Agenda (GPA) was also institutionalized. Mayor Jun described the GPA as a product of collective discussion and leadership; a comprehensive program of government; a solution to the challenges; and it assures the better future of the people. In September 2010, the local government established the Dumingag Institute of Sustainable Organic Agriculture (DISOA), a school that trains farmers on organic farming principles and technology.

Though DISOA started with modular courses as a vocational school, it aims to become a regular college later offering special and ladderized courses on organic agriculture. Moreover, all public and private school teachers in all levels in the municipality were educated on Sustainable Organic Agriculture and Climate Change. The never say die attitude of a veteran cadre like Mayor Pacalioga is the major attribute to the success of his local innovations. He

displayed strong political will despite the initial lukewarm response of the people.

The municipality's aggressive push for organic farming was the bedrock of a bigger program to bring socioeconomic uplift to the residents. The story of Mayor Pacalioga and the municipality of Dumingag is no different from the Curitiba experience with Mayor Jamie Lerner. It only goes to say that local innovations and governance works in any environment, people and culture. Mayor Lerner, a city planner has transformed Curitiba into a healthy and liveable city through modernizing transport system, environment-friendly parks and systematic garbage disposal.

Conversely, Mayor Pacalioga, a former rebel leader has reinvented Dumingag into a sustainable rural community by introducing not only organic agriculture, but also optimize agricultural land use by having it planted with high value trees and crops; and empowered the women to venture into livelihood programs. Dumingag or Curitiba; Philippines or Brazil, the concept towards sustainable development through local governance innovations are the same. Alternatively, local civil society also plays an important role in the transparent and participative process that the local government is introducing.

The efforts of the local government, be it in Brazil or Philippines would not have taken off had the people's organizations, non-government organizations and the civil society did not cooperate. The success behind the local innovations and programs in any community, for that matter was a classic example of local convergence at work. Dumingag achievements were not limited to agricultural statistics. Politically, the municipality also

managed to improve in terms of increase in local taxes and business. Based on the LGU data, the municipal income increased tremendously at an average of P3M per annum, swelling from P4. 5M in 2007 to P13. M in 2010. Likewise, business establishments rose from 180 in 2007 to 324 in 2010. The estimated AverageMoneyCirculation in the market vicinity also climbed from P100, 000 in 2007 to P2. 5 Million in 2010. These achievements are phenomenal for a second class town like Dumingag which 84% of its people are considered poor according to NSCB standards. Now, the municipality of Dumingag is implementing its master plan on organic agriculture. It is a specific blueprint of the town's courses of action and scientific approach towards sustainable development. The Dumingag LGU has also established partnerships with Assisi Development Foundation, Inc. (ADFI), for partnership in Sustainable Agriculture, Water System, and Lumad Education; Xavier University- Sustainable Agriculture Center for education and advocacy for Sustainable Agriculture and Climate Change; Philippine Agrarian Reform Fund (PARFUND) for Rice-Duck Farming and Technology; Department of Agriculture, for various programs and projects for livelihood and support infra services; and the JH Cerilles State College, for research and documentation wherein the LGU has entered into a MOA to transform 100% the 43 hectares rice fields owned by the school into organic farming model in support of the organic agriculture drive of the municipality. In 2010, as recognition of its innovative practices on sustainable organic agriculture, the Dumingag LGU, through Mayor Jun Pacalioga was conferred with the prestigious Galing Pook Award as one of the Ten Outstanding Local Governance Programs in the Philippines. This was personally conferred to the proud mayor by His Excellency Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III.

The Galing Pook award is a national search of local governance programs, evaluated through a multilevel screening process based on positive results and impact; promotion of people participation and empowerment; transferability and sustainability; and efficiency of program service delivery. Beyond the awards, winning programs become models of good governance promoted for adoption in other communities. They provide useful insights and strategies to find innovative solutions to common problems. More importantly, they affirm the community and the local government's commitment to good governance. The efforts of the visionary mayor really paid off.

It is evident that Mayor Pacalioga made use of his skills in community organizing, together with his strong personality in pursuing his reform programs for the poor. Dumingag is now generating and storing its own seed varieties of rice so that they will not be at the mercy of big agricultural firms in the future. The campaign of Mayor Jun also resulted in the increase of farming and planting activities in the municipality, all of these are geared towards sustainable livelihood and economic development. These developments are apparent in the extent of plantation areas compared to 2007 data. For example, Cassava areas increased from 350 to 2000 hectares; Abaca fields rose from 5 to 500 hectares; rubber areas goes up from 10 hectares to 1,100; and Falcata plantation climbed from 5 hectares to 200 hectares.

It is remarkable to note that the local government innovation that started in the simple town has now gone international. Recently, through the facilitation of SAC-Xavier University, the Dumingag LGU was able to send

three delegates to South Korea for three-month training on Natural Farming Systems. The recipients were the Municipal Agriculture Officer, a municipal agricultural technician and a Sangguniang Bayan member. Sources: Organic farming takes root in Zamboanga del Sur Retrieved from: <http://www.newsinfo.inquirer.net> Sustainable Organic Agriculture. pdf Retrieved from <http://www.bswm.da.gov.ph> Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines Retrieved from: <http://www.ugnayan.com/ph/ZamboangadelSur/Dumingag>