

Hankering for more indigenous rice from the rice terraces

Philippine Agriculture Magazine

March 29, 2007

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It seemed unlikely for a lowlander and a woman to tell the highland natives what it takes to save the rice terraces from neglect, abandonment, deterioration and its ultimate disappearance from the local landscape. All the way from Cavite, this lady with a big heart came into the scene and brought with her, the right development objective and strategy that brought hope to the most marginalized sector in the Cordillera region --- the highland rice terraces farmers. She showed Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike, the value of indigenous highland rice and thus directly and indirectly encouraged the Cordillera highland rice farming communities to continue cultivating the rice terraces for food production and tourism; conserve the good traditional practices associated with rice terraces farming; conserve and remain stewards of over 300 indigenous rice species; and, remain as stewards of watershed protection and environmental quality preservation in the Cordillera Region up here in Northern Luzon.

Traveling monthly on rugged and precipitous roads

Since January 2005, Ma. Victoria C. Garcia (Vicky), Executive Director of the Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE) Incorporated, has been traveling monthly on the torturous roads of the Cordillera. From Manila, she has been going to wherever farmers call for her to a meeting in the provinces of Ifugao and Kalinga.

From Manila, it is a long and difficult overnight bus ride of 11 hours to Ifugao or a trip of 14 hours to Kalinga. The ride does not usually end-up in the provincial capitals of Lagawe, Ifugao or Tabuk, Kalinga. Her meetings would take her deep into the hinterlands through rough, rugged and yes, precipitous roads that characterizes the region's road system.

Afflicted with polio in her toddler years, one wonders where her desire to work in a difficult region is coming from. "Don't get bothered about the way I walk or whether I can make it to my destination. It should be enough for me to tell you that I always have this passion to do the will of God in my life," Vicky told me after her visit with DA-RFU-CAR Regional Executive Director Cesar Rodriguez this week.

A woman with a mission, Vicky's passion right now is focused on helping the rice terraces farmers, one of the most marginalized sectors in the Cordillera region. In our meeting she immediately reminded me that we were once co-employees at the Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency (PNVSCA) some two decades ago. I recall that she was a strong-willed individual and determined in her ways. I know she sincerely meant it when she explained that she want her work here

to contribute towards the preservation of the rice terraces, the region's native rices and the beautiful culture of the rice terraces people.

That statement does not come empty. For two years, she was confronted with typhoons and landslides, tribal conflicts and other human limitations that conspire together to wear out and doom to failure a noble pursuit or aspiration with lesser commitment and inspired endurance. Her journal reveals that she pursued her goals in close contact with her clients under "the blazing hot weather during harvest and in the cold chill of the mountain rains just before the planting of the rice seedlings" in the terraced rice paddies and hinterland communities.

An objective to "save the rice terraces"

In two years, Vicky and her group pursued and accomplished the most significant, relevant and meaningful objective that was overlooked in the implementation of the Philippine government's "Save the Rice Terraces Program." That is, to make the traditional rice varieties --- "the crop that nearly every high-elevation rice farmer grows --- a source of economic opportunity for the farmers, their families and communities."

Through the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project, the RICE, Inc., developed a sustainable economic enterprise that is now helping farmers use their traditional knowledge and expertise in terrace farming and rice cultivation to develop a globally competitive specialty food product, according to Vicky.

At the same time, the group, in cooperation with the local people is in pursuit of the following objectives: 1) The preservation of traditional rice varieties grown in historic high elevation rice terraces; 2) Revitalize the indigenous cultures of community rice production through economic enterprise; and 3) Raise public awareness of the importance of the historic rice terraces. The group is comprised of Mary Hensley, a former U.S. Peace Corp volunteer in Kalinga, a team of five multi-talented Filipino board-of-directors, and another five staff.

In 2006, the RICE, Inc. was able to ship to the US a total of more than 7 tons of Kalinga and Ifugao terraces rice out of a target of 10 tons. Initially the farmers actually pledged to provide 12 tons but an unusually high number of typhoons plus production and processing problems prevented them from meeting the target.

Aside from the shipment of rice from the terraces to the US, this non-stock, non-profit NGO accomplished a great number of relevant activities for the rice terraces farmers. Through the support and guidance of RICE, Inc. the rice terraces farmers were organized into cooperatives and associations. In Kalinga Province, they have already begun the process of forming a federated association of unoy rice growers.

Inputs from RICE, Inc for empowering the rice farmers in 2006 did not end with group formation. They established seed banks as ready sources of rice seeds for the

rice terraces. They also provided capitalization funds and other assistance aimed at making the cooperatives and farmers associations become more viable. Other support included training on quality control and expansion of the coverage of the project.

In the same year, RICE, Inc. also strengthened its local operation with the assignment of Mr. Adam Angsten, a US Peace Corps Volunteer with a degree in economics and currently based in Banaue, Ifugao to the Cordillera Heirloom Project. At the same time, RICE, Inc. pursued linkage relationships with over 20 international and local rice, trade and cultural organizations that include UNESCO, Asia Rice Foundation, USA, IRRI, Fair Trade and Organic Organization, among others in their bid to highlight the importance of the rice terraces to the people in the Cordillera and the Philippines as a whole.

For this year, RICE, Inc has committed to increase its support to 3-5 village farmers' groups in its coverage areas. It will also expand the revolving seed bank for selected varieties of traditional rice and increase the purchase and export of traditional rice to 20 metric tons of selected varieties of traditional rice.

Through Eight Wonder, Inc. the partner organization of RICE, Inc in the USA, four Cordillera rice are being promoted in the US specialty food market as natural gourmet rice and bearing their brand as rice from the Cordillera. These are: Tinawon fancy known in Banaue and Hingyon as Imbu-ucan. This rice is known for its taste and texture, mild aroma and fast cooking qualities. Tinawon white is an exceptional white staple variety with a wonderful aroma and mild eating flavor. The Kalinga Unoy has a rare delectable taste and aroma served during festivals and ceremonies, and Ulikan Red has an "earthy" aroma with mild eating taste and nice after taste.

Moving towards a region-wide operation, Vicky is currently laying out the staging of two region-wide meetings for the formation of a farmer owned rice-buying cooperative; establish a centrally located buying station and initial processing facility; and, coordinate activities with local government units and municipal agricultural offices.

The project is also seeking to expand its operation to Mt. Province, Abra and Apayao in the next five years.

In coordination with the DA-RFU-CAR Regional executive Director Cesar D. Rodriguez and PhilRice Executive Director Leocadio Sebastian, a training was set this April for forty people to identify suitable postharvest equipment for the rice terraces.

Farmers return to cultivate abandoned rice terraces

The project has demonstrated that the decades-old quest of saving the rice terraces from neglect, deterioration and disappearance can be achieved with the right development objective, community and inter-agency participatory approaches.

The project is already making its impact on the lives of the rice terraces farmers and also those outside of the Cordillera villages. Documented reactions from Ifugao Province show that through this project, the old folks are glad to note that the younger generation can continue to cultivate the land because now, “there is value put on our rice.”

A similar reaction came from Ms. Julie Aclam, Assistant Provincial Agriculturist of Kalinga Province when she said in a recent interview that people are returning to their abandoned rice terraces because now there is value to it. By growing and selling their native rice, they can now buy rice and other household items. Hopefully, they can also send their children to school,” she said.

Back in Ifugao, the Sanguniang Bayan of Hingyon now looks at their rice as a tool for building good relations with the people of the USA. “This project is challenging our capacity as a people not just because we are inspired by their desire to buy our rice but to build a bridge and partnership for cherishing our cultures. We can stand up together to produce quality rice for the international market and we truly appreciate their noble patronage of our product.”

Over the long term, making the rice terraces profitable will not only make this tourist drawer and eight wonder become simply a UNESCO museum object without the rice. This can happen and tragically so if the rice terraces farming systems which is closely tied to watershed protection and forest conservation are neglected. In this way, rice terraces farming serves more than the highlanders but is also a forest conservation tool that enhances the role and viability of the Cordillera as the watershed cradle for Northern Luzon.

It would be noted that where there was a shift from the farming system in the Cordillera from rice to any other crop, the result proved catastrophic to the local environment. Where the age-old ways of the locality’s traditional rice farming systems are done away with in favor of modern cash agriculture, the forest which were usually protected as watersheds are ultimately encroached upon and wasted for short-term benefits.

Making the rice terraces profitable brings great and indirect services to the lowlands of Northern Luzon. During the rainy season, the rice terraces mitigate flashfloods downstream by holding run-off water. As reservoirs the rice terraces collect and hold water from the mountains during the rainy season. These structures also draws water from creeks and rivers to irrigate the terraced paddy fields, penetrates into the soil and gradually releases the water downstream throughout the year. The rice terraces therefore help keep the river systems to the lowland rice fields in regions 1 and 2 flowing even during the dry months of the year.

For Vicky and her group, we add this piece to the native’s growing appreciation of a truly relevant initiative. The only one of its kind, the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project

draws “from the peoples’ existing culture and agricultural knowledge as a source for economic development, community revitalization and environmental preservation.” Such pursuits are definitely what the Cordillera needs in the quest of its people, comprising of 98 percent indigenous peoples, for autonomy and significance in this part of the country.

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