

Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project Wins Funding High Praise at Panibagong Paraan 2008

Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE), Inc., a Filipino non-profit/non-governmental organization (NGO), received major funding during the recent Panibagong Paraan 2008 grant competition, held in Manila on April 9-10, 2008. In addition to receiving the sum of 1 million pesos (approximately US\$25,000), RICE's Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project was uniquely honored with the highest recommendation from all members of the grantmaking jury.

"To win the Panibagong Paraan award validates the dream, the hard work and the commitment made by all of our project partners," said Ms Garcia, executive director of RICE, Inc. "Through this grant, we can continue to expand the programs and services needed by our farmers—our core stakeholders—as they realize their vision of an economic and cultural revival, and the preservation of the terraces through an economic enterprise firmly rooted in their indigenous culture."

The Panibagong Paraan (meaning "a new way"), is a nationwide biennial grant competition funded by a consortium of Filipino and international agencies, including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, USAID, Australian and Canadian international aid agencies, the British Embassy, the Asia Foundation, the Peace and Equity Foundation and the Department of Interior and Local Government. This year's round of grants targeted projects that build partnerships for effective local governance. Five hundred projects submitted entries to the competition; ninety-nine project finalists vied for funding during the two-day competition and exhibition held at the SM Megamall Megatrade Hall. Thirty-three organizations received funding.

The Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project received its grant award from the Peace and Equity Foundation (PEF), a non-profit foundation based in the Philippines. PEF supports the work of civil society in eradicating poverty and marginalization and promotes an ethos of social harmony, cooperation, and sharing. The Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project, active in northern Luzon since 2005, makes traditional rice varieties a source of economic opportunity for indigenous farmers in Ifugao, Kalinga, and Mountain Provinces. With the funds received from PEF, the Cordillera Rice Project can expand its outreach to farmers and better coordinate the technical expertise and resources of government agencies in support of the farmers' efforts to organize and strengthen their cooperatives, increase production, improve processing and market it globally for the benefit of the farmers.

Native varieties of heirloom rice, uniquely adapted to their native growing conditions, have been cultivated in the Cordillera for centuries, but had never been sold commercially until the founding of the project in 2005. "The farmers have unparalleled knowledge and understanding that comes from growing these unique varieties of rice for generations. By giving economic value to native rice, an avenue opens for government agencies to support high-elevation farmers, who have been marginalized for a number of reasons, geography and ethnicity among them," says Mary Hensley, founder of Eighth Wonder, Inc., the US-based marketing company and project partner.

Administered by Ma. Victoria (Vicky) Garcia, a native of Laguna, Philippines, the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project coordinates the resources, workshops and training to farmers. With proper technology, post-harvest facilities, and enhanced training on productivity, farmers will be able to make a decent living by producing sustainably grown rice, states Garcia. Equally important are the workshops that focus on strengthening the farmers' cooperatives. The cooperative model encourages the involvement of women and operates with principles such as open membership, democratic control, education, and financial transparency.

The significance of the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project and the PEF funding was underscored by recent media reports of a threatening global rice shortage. The Philippine government anticipates that, in the face of rising prices and food scarcity, people will increase the amount of food they grow. "This projects is about expanding production on the rice terraces so that there will be enough surplus to sell," says Hensley. "Whether the farmers choose to sell the rice or eat it themselves, their economic and food security is increased."