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## **Uplifting the Multi-functional Roles of the Rice Terraces (Part 2)**

*Is there a future waiting for the Philippine Rice Terraces in the Cordillera?*

Given the continuous deterioration of this world heritage site, the question is something we may well ask. What good future, for instance, is envisioned for the rice terraces and how can it come true?

In the past two decades, economic development projects designed to contribute towards the thrust of "saving the rice terraces" were implemented. However, few of these succeeded. The implementation of tourism-related projects and retraining for new skills in farming, and the introduction of high-value commercial fruits and vegetables and high yielding rice varieties only showed that these, after all, were not the solutions to keep the rice terraces beautiful now and in the years to come.

A study conducted by the Tebtebba Foundation, a Philippine-based global policy research center, found that the shift into tourism-related livelihoods - such as the mass production of wood carvings and the establishment of lodgings on properties within the ricefields - has actually taken a major environmental toll on terrace areas. Moreover, the use of pesticides by vegetable farmers has introduced new pests.

While new challenges emerged, old but important concerns remain unresolved. These include the migration of farmers, thus abandoning rice terraces farming; the deterioration of the watersheds for the rice terraces; the collapse of centuries-old irrigation systems, and the disappearance of indigenous cultures on growing traditional rice, among others.

Through the years, only one thing seemed certain. The rice terraces which were found extensively in the highland areas of Abra, Benguet, Kalinga, Ifugao and Mt.

Province gradually shrunk. In fact, only about 20,000 hectares of functional rice terraces situated in the north central Cordillera remain today. According to UNESCO, if the damage to the terraces is not arrested, the loss may be irreversible.

What could be an effective approach that could save the terraces from vanishing in the Cordillera landscape is to put an economic value to this centuries-old, noble and ingenious profession of rice terraces farming, Mary Hensley, former US peace corp volunteer in Lubuagan, Kalinga Province, observed.

For her, the steadfast farmers of the Cordillera are the ones who can save the terraces. They have carefully nurtured the rice terraces that is why they need to be encouraged to stay and take care of the land. She recommended that this could be done through sustainable economic development approaches and activities that enhance cultural revitalization, promote indigenous rice production, and develop profitable business out of traditional rice farming.

A former social worker, Hensley envisioned a regional economic development project, which has become known as the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project. This project is a collaboration among the Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE), Inc., a capacity-building NGO; terrace farmers in the provinces of Ifugao and Kalinga; Eighth Wonder, Inc; and the provincial and municipal government units (LGUs) in these two provinces.

Hensley established the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project after she went back to graduate school in 2001 to pursue a master's degree in organizational management and social entrepreneurship. She wanted to establish a project that would be successful financially and not dependent on dole outs from the government or international development agencies. Focused on making traditional rice varieties, a source of economic opportunity, the project has been operating on a mission to preserve the Cordillera Heirloom Rice and the culture of community rice production that surrounds it for two years now.

In graduate school, Hensley did a feasibility study on whether native rice could be sold in a highly competitive specialty food market in the United States. When the results looked promising, she wrote a five-year business plan which projects the organizational needs and costs for organizing farmers and for developing a marketing strategy to sell the rice at a price that compensates the farmers' hard work.

She then wrote her master's capstone on the shared equity business model, a type of business model that includes capital-poor producers/partners in the ownership of the retailing entity. Convinced that this kind of business could be economically successful, Hensley and RICE, Inc. Executive Director Vicky Garcia began to approach the farmers.

Hensley said that in 2003, few believed that the marketing of the tinawon rice from Ifugao or the unoy rice from Kalinga would work. When no NGO or international development agency became interested in supporting an heirloom rice project in the Cordillera, Garcia decided to establish RICE, Inc., that would support farmers to take advantage of this economic opportunity.

The RICE, Inc., according to Garcia, is building the bridge between the farmers and the export market through workshops, trainings and extensive networking. In 2006, the response to this initiative was overwhelmingly positive.

And for the first time, more farmers are returning to rice terraces farming because now they sense a profit and value from growing native rice, Julie Aclam, assistant provincial agriculturist from Kalinga, reported.

With assistance from RICE, Inc., the newly established Rice Terraces Farmers' Cooperative of Ifugao and Kalinga was able to produce and process a total of 7 metric tons of export-quality native tinawon and unoy. These varieties were exported to the gourmet rice market in the United States through the help of the Eighth Wonder, Inc. The rice varieties were sold at a fair trade price, which was paid in advance to help capitalize cooperative.

The Eighth Wonder, Inc., a non-stock, non-profit NGO, has also accomplished a 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. They have already begun forming a federated association of unoy rice growers - Kalinga Province.

The support of RICE, Inc. did not end there. In 2006, they also established seed banks as ready sources of rice seeds for the rice terraces and provided capital and other assistance to make the cooperatives and associations more viable. Other support included training on quality control and expansion of the coverage of the project.

In the same year, the operation of the Cordillera Heirloom through RICE, Inc. was strengthened due to the assignment of Adam Angsten, a US peace corps volunteer with a degree in economics in Banaue, Ifugao. At the same time, RICE, Inc. pursued linkage with over 20 international and local rice, trade and cultural organizations including UNESCO, Asia Rice Foundation, USA, IRRI, Fair Trade and Organic Organization, among others to highlight the importance of the rice terraces to the people in the Cordillera, the Philippines and the world.

RICE, Inc., through its consultation with the farmers, has committed to increase its support to three to five village farmers groups in its coverage areas in 2007. 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.

In 2006, Hensley established Eighth Wonder, Inc. (USA), as the marketing entity for the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project that works in partnership with the Rice Terraces Farmers Cooperative, RICE, Inc. and national, regional, provincial, municipal local government agencies that support the project.

Eighth Wonder, Inc. has envisioned that poverty reduction and indigenous cultural and environmental protection could be achieved through sustainable entrepreneurship. It has also a mission to be a global model for culturally-sensitive economic development within the framework of indigenous cultures, according to Hensley.

Hensley revealed that Eighth Wonder, Inc. also wanted to help farmers - through their cooperative become equal shareholders in the business along with the US investors who have put up the capital to support the business until there is sufficient volume of sales to make it sustainable. She also said that there are several, fair trade companies in Europe that have some percentage of equity ownership, but there are few or none in the United States.

The shared-equity model directly links producers and retailers. By committing to the inclusion of producers at the onset, Eighth Wonder, Inc. intends to provide an opportunity for producers to be equal partners with a meaningful stake in the success of the business. Of course, this includes the risks and responsibilities associated with business ownership. If the co-op will become a strong functioning entity, elected representatives will sit on the board of directors of Eighth Wonder, Inc. and the co-op will be able to share the benefits associated with long-term asset gains. This will result not only in greater economic benefits for the producers and for their community but will also motivate producers to work together to create something that is truly farmer owned.

Compared to commercial standards, what was started by Hensley and Garcia is still a small development project with great implication to the future of the rice terraces. The success of this project will depend on the ability to coordinate and to build the project on both sides of the world. The successful capacity-building and organization of the farmers must be balanced with the development of a market presence that will meet the ever-increasing volumes of rice. This is probably a vision with so much at stake, but it is also definitely the one that will move mountains to bring in a profitable livelihood among the rice terraces farmers and a quality and wholesome environment for Northern Luzon.

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