



OPINION / DOMOGUEN: A SIMPLE WISH FOR THE CORDILLERA AGRICULTURE SECTOR IN 2018

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MOUNTAIN LIGHT

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A TRAVEL to the interior of the region always gives me a reading of how our mountain environment is faring in the midst of all forms of development that are occurring in the land.

Actually, many of the topics I have been presenting under this column, published by Sun Star over the years, reported on the continued deterioration of the region's natural resources and its effects to the people's quest for agricultural livelihoods, rural development, progress, and survival.

In this latest trip, I am not surprised but continue to be saddened by its latest findings.

My father-in-law, Mr. Alexander Ngay-os, is a respected elder in Tocucan, Bontoc, Mountain Province. He is the type that would rather listen than volunteer his opinions. But his views on various aspects of life are drawn from his personal experiences.

On farming, his story shows how rice terraces farming has become a losing venture in his time. Like most inhabitants in this part of the globe, his rice paddies are found in the community's rice terraces' clusters in the mountains within the territory of Tocucan. He worked hard on his land since his retirement from the mines in the 1990s.

When his generation took over the operations of the rice terraces, he was yet working in the mines. The rice terraces in those years were fully irrigated and cultivated all year. The paddies yielded rice, indigenous vegetables, shells, crabs, and fishes as food.

Several paddies in the community's rice terraces clusters were not operated by their owners starting in the 1990s because of irrigation problems. The sources of water for some irrigation systems dried out. The lack of domestic and irrigation water has become a source of conflict between communities and among members in a number of communities in the interior, he said.

Over the years, the watersheds have drastically dwindled in most areas of the Cordillera, being converted into vegetable farms, industrial, and housing purposes. Also, the and the forests were annually torched for kaingin and ranching purposes, or by irresponsible people who throw their lighted cigarettes in the bushes. This contributed to the dwindling of the forest cover.

Over the years, more rice fields were abandoned. Mr. Ngay-os affirmed that farming no longer made sense especially to the younger generation. From the 1990s-2015, he used hired labor from nearby municipalities to keep his rice paddies in operation. But when the hired-hands which were crucial to his operation found better-paying jobs elsewhere, he slowly reduced his operations, until he finally stopped farming some two years ago.

But it is not the unavailability of labor or farmhands that forced him to stop. For one, he is already old to do most of the work. Another is the emergence of new problems. On top of the irrigation problem and dwindling farmhands, he said that lack of seeds and new pests and diseases will ultimately lead people to totally abandon the rice terraces.

On the lack of seeds, he said that people once depended on each other to keep and provide for each other's needs. As farmers, each one actually grows several varieties of rice in one season and keeps the good seeds that are also shared with other farmers in the community. When farmers no longer farm, the seeds that they grow and keep are lost, he explained.

On pest and diseases, he said that he was able to cope with rats that invade the rice fields from time to time. He used a combination of traps and poison. What ultimately discouraged him is a new bird species that descend on the field and then with beaks like cutters, they attack the rice during its panicle formation and differentiation stages, laying to waste any farmer's hopes for a bountiful harvest of nutritious rice for the whole year.

MY SIMPLE WISH

It is sad to imagine how Mary Hensley and her group dropped out of the venture they nourished for almost a decade. The enterprise brought hope to rice terraces farmers in the Cordillera.

The people who took over and continued the initiative have since transformed it into a joint research endeavor of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). It is a good exercise imagining how an army of R&D experts backed-up by funding that a non-government organization like Eighth Wonder, Inc. could not imagine having in so many years, will bring benefits to the Cordillera and its rice terraces farmers. Two years past since this NGO stopped its operations in CAR, I wish that with the full backing of public investment, rice terraces farming in the region is moving on its way to becoming a community enterprise, as it used to be. Other than that, we could be witnessing the last days of rice terraces farming as a local livelihood and a national tourist attraction and venture here.

Agriculture in the Cordillera is dependent on small packets of flat lands scattered in the ruggedness of the region's terrain. The locals have added more to their farmlands on the plateaus and valley bottoms by terracing the mountain slopes. But these are also being eaten away, in

recent time, by the increasing population's requirements for housing, transport, schools, hospitals, and other uses.

Profitable and competitive farming is dependent on the sustainable production of agricultural commodities of scale. With limited land, this could hardly be met. Ms. Hensley and company, have since demonstrated that it is possible for heirloom rice farmers to meet this requirement even if only a tenth of their product is collected and marketed by a federated farmers' cooperative every harvest season.

Benguet Province has long demonstrated how high-value crops can be a competitive farming enterprise in our mountainous setting. Over the years, however, this type of farming demonstrated the need for our local citizens and their communities of finding ways that will effectively preserve and conserve their watersheds and natural water systems. These are essential to the provision of irrigation and potable water needs. With water lack, vegetable farmers would also be discouraged about their farming ventures.

Farming and the farmers of the Cordillera hold the key in making the Cordillera continually habitable, productive and useful to nation-building. For instance, for the sake of farming and the farmers, we need to conserve and protect the region's natural resources. If we do that, we do not only safeguard the quality of life and livelihoods within the region but also those in nearby regions. For that cause alone, invest money, time, and effort to the region's agriculture, and you invest wisely to nation-building. My simple wish for 2018 is for the farmers to succeed in all their ventures!