

BAGUIO

Domoguen: Save the nation's rice farmers

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September 30, 2019

(Conclusion of a three series article)

IN OUR previous article, we mentioned some of the projects and activities of the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project (CHRP) that played well into the “New Thinking in Agriculture” strategy of Dr. William D. Dar, the current Secretary of the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The CHRP’s projects and activities came to mind, in light of the ongoing rice crises and the need for all regions given their agro-ecological zones to contribute to the nation’s quest for food security and profitable livelihood for the farmers.

The CHRP is a joint initiative of the USA-based Eighth-Wonder, Inc. and RICE, Inc., a Filipino non-governmental organization (NGO). Its operations spotlighted the multifunctional roles of the rice terraces to economic and rural development, including environmental quality in northern Luzon.

One of the CHRP’s activities, the processing of heirloom rice for export to niche markets abroad, generated attention from the government for the development and continued conservation of the rice terraces and heirloom rice varieties.

I believe so because, before the CHRP, the rice terraces and the farmers were largely left on their own. When the Project ceased its operations in the latter part of 2016 until today, many government development interventions (independent and dispersed) were already being implemented to address development issues and concerns involving the rice terraces.

Before they decided to withdraw from the Cordillera, I met with Mary Hensley, founder of Eighth Wonder, Inc. and Vicky Garcia, Director of RICE, Inc., last September 24, 2016, at the Café by the Ruins Restaurant, Baguio City.

During our meeting, Ms. Hensley gave me a copy of the “Stanford Social Innovation Review,” a reputable publication by the Stanford University that is read by livelihood innovators, researchers, and business and government leaders, around the world.

I recall scanning the publication and saw an article by Liz Carlisle, entitled “The Terrace Keepers” of the Cordillera.

The article summarized the efforts done towards the industrialization of heirloom rice farming through the CHRP.

A value chain study conducted by researchers from a university in New York, USA guided the initial steps in organizing the operation of the enterprise. It started with community organization and

empowerment activities for members of the heirloom rice producers' cooperatives towards the consolidation of resources, inputs, and outputs.

This was soon followed by on-site training, coaching, and mentoring on production, processing, and packaging of rice to meet export quality standards.

Some farmers were also sent by the Eighth Wonder Inc., to train in India on System of Rice Intensification (SRI). The NGO also financed the market exposition and familiarization tour of heirloom farmers and local government technicians to the USA and Europe.

Modernization of heirloom rice farming was yet enhanced through research (it was through Mary Hensley's request to ATI-CAR and BSU that the characterization of rice was started), and she also commissioned the design and production of a customized heirloom rice milling machine. The project also experimented on drying and storage packing and materials to protect the quality and value of heirloom rice from the source to the market.

Through the CHRP and the efforts of Ms. Hensley, the Cordillera heirloom rice varieties were registered and prominently heralded in the "World's Ark of Taste," and gained respectability in niche markets in USA and Canada.

Some people voiced the idea that the enterprise is making money at the expense of the farmers. The reverse is true. Throughout their operation, Ms. Hensley has been giving not only cash to the farmers from the income made by the enterprise aside from the agreed buying price of their rice. The rest of the income was yet invested for training, procurement of equipment, and related development expenses.

As it was then and obviously today, the dire lack of volume remains as a primary problem towards developing this industry that government research and development effort must address through technology, area expansion, and extension services, that helps or unite with what the private sector can best do in behalf of the farmers.

Today, the vision to develop a heirloom rice industry that truly benefits the rice terraces farmers and their communities; enhance and improve the farmers' economic livelihoods, sustain best cultural and traditional practices on rice terraces farming; and, sustain the region's role as watershed of northern Luzon in tandem with the private sector, has been aborted.

As suggested in the eight paradigms of Secretary Dar's "New Thinking in Agriculture" strategy, the vision for the profitability of the rice terraces can yet be born and attained through modernization, industrialization, export, consolidation, roadmap development, infrastructure, higher budget and investment, and legislative support.

During his recent visit to the Cordillera, Secretary Dar suggested that a Cordillera Rice Terraces Commission, if not a corporation can be formed to consolidate resources and undertake appropriate interventions to pursue the full potentials and benefits of the rice terraces in the Cordillera, Northern Luzon, and the nation as a whole.

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