

Building Farmers' Assets and Investing in the Out of School Youths for Rural Development

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ABSTRACT

Philippine agriculture is faced with many challenges. Poverty and low productivity in the rural areas continue to persist. Even if the country is agricultural in nature, it is still regarded as a lowly profession. Majority of the farmers are poor. Hence, it discourages the young people to go into farming and agriculture in general. . Young people who are successors to the aging farmers tend to go to the urban areas rather than stay in the rural areas and go into farming. They don't see any future in agriculture.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) through the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) and its partners still believe that there is still hope and future in agriculture if only the government and the private sector will work together to build the farmers' assets and invest in the out-of-school youths (OSYs) for rural development.

DA-ATI has implemented various programs to realize this. Among which are the Schools for Practical Agriculture (SPA), the ladderized course for OSY, Youth in Agriculture and Fisheries Program, the e-Extension Program, the grow local and eat local movement, among many other programs to capacitate the youth and the farmers.

The Institute with the implementation of these programs hopes to build dreams and change lives among our poor.

INTRODUCTION

Farming and agriculture in this part of the world is regarded a lowly profession. This is understandable because Filipino farmers/fishers and most of those who depended in agriculture are among the poorest of the poor, thus rural areas are usually impoverished. The stigma of poverty and malnutrition in farm families and rural communities forced outmigration thereby trigger enumerable problems in the urban centers. It also discouraged young people to engage in farming and agriculture in the rural areas.

While many may have given up agriculture and considered it a dying if not a dead industry, the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and its partners believed otherwise. We see Philippine agriculture today similar to the sprouting of a new plant from its seeds or the hatching of the chicken egg to a chick or the birth of a farm animal. Only, it needs a lot of efforts and political will to make it a viable industry and occupation. This can also be achieved if we build on the farmers' assets and invest in the out-of-school youths (OSYs) to develop them as successor farmers.

Usually, when one talks about farmers' assets, it referred to the farm lands, draft animals or machineries that will be used to produce agricultural products. It may also include some amount of money that can be spent in farm activities. However, little importance is given to that asset "between the two ears" of the farmer much more those "small" farmers in the

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impoverished rural areas where most of them hardly finished elementary education much more formal education at all.

It is that “asset” of the farmer must be built because it is in there where big things happen that may have started from small dreams. That is why the ATI takes as its motto “building dreams, changing lives.” It is building the dreams of any farmer by harnessing their talents and skills to change their lives for good. The Institute will build on the farmers’ dreams to cause positive changes in their lives and that of their families.

The same is also true with the OSYs. The rural youths whom many of them are OSYs usually face many barriers when pursuing higher education. Added to their woes is the lack of employment opportunities after graduating from secondary school since they are not prepared for the world of work. Most often, these OSYs end up as farmers if not doing some menial jobs in the urban centers. Since these OSYs lack the necessary education and skills in profitable farming, then most often their farming ventures end up in a dismal failure.

Having this common scenario, it is most appropriate to invest in our OSYs. By investing in their training and education today, we are not only developing successor farmers and farm managers. Therefore, a complementary program that will help build the assets of the farmers and invest in the OSYs will surely promote agricultural and rural development in the Philippines.

SCHOOLS FOR PRACTICAL AGRICULTURE (SPA)

The SPA is a scheme wherein the farmers will be trained as trainer/extension worker in the community and his farm lot will be developed as a demonstration area or practical learning site. Eventually, it will be used for micro-teaching for other farmers and OSYs especially those who are enrolled in a ladderized course in agri-entrepreneurship. After fully trained as local trainer/extension worker, the farmer will act as community extension worker with support from ATI perhaps the local government unit (LGU) and other farmers. The farmer trainer will also receive financial assistance to develop his farm lot as hands-on learning sites which will later on form part of a network of “practical schools” for agriculture or farm schools network.

After extensive capacity building in farm entrepreneurship, the farmer trainer will be encouraged to take competency certification tests from the Technical Skills and Development Authority (TESDA). His/her farm lot will also be certified as practical learning sites. Members of the network of practical agriculture learning sites will soon be opened to visitors as part of an advocacy to promote the idea of “farm tourism.” By promoting farm tourism, the SPA learning sites will become tourism spots where actual agricultural activities can be witnessed and learned by visitors. It will also set the inclusion of community activities to show the beauty of agricultural landscape which can attract hands-on practice for students, educational tours for local government officials, extension workers and even researchers.

The SPA will serve as a venue for interaction among farmers including tourists on the commodity production management as a vehicle for information sharing and technology transfer. It will further harness the full potential in the resource-rich farming/fishing communities towards a holistic and integrated community-based agri-business-eco-tourism program which will uplift the quality of life of the people in the rural areas.

The involvement of the local communities in farm tourism activities can empower farmers, fishers, extension service providers (ESPs), rural based organizations (RBOs) and indigenous people’s (IPs). Moreover, it will build their capabilities and capacities for them to develop and manage agri-business-eco-tourism projects in their areas. Furthermore, it gives support to the agricultural and rural development programs as well as tourism initiatives aside from strengthening public-private partnership through investments and provision of

counterpart funds. The “farmers assets” will surely be harnessed and developed as a viable production occupation, source of income and livelihood.

Specifically, the SPA is designed to:

1. Develop farmers and their farms as viable and productive occupation and source of income and livelihood;
2. Build capabilities and capacities of farmers/fishers, ESPs, RBOs, and IPs for them to develop and manage agri-business-eco-tourism projects in their areas;
3. Develop and implement agri-business-eco-tourism projects in municipalities and establish one-stop-shops showcasing the products and resources of the communities;
4. Strengthen public-private partnership through investments and provision of counterpart resources; and
5. Document the project’s success stories.

The basic principles in this program are that farmers will evolve as teachers/educators for other farmers in the community and the farmers’ farm will be the demonstration area/practical agriculture learning sites for the farmers and those aspiring to engage in farming. In choosing the farmer to be the community teacher under the SPA, the following criteria are set:

1. Graduates of Training of Trainers (TOT), Farmers Field Schools (FFS), Farmer Led Extension (FLE) trainings of ATI, Magsasaka-Siyentista (MS) or farmer scientist, or those who have undergone training in Training Services Enhancement Program for Rural Life Improvement (TSEP-RLI);
2. Farmer leader in the community;
3. He/she is willing to be trained;
4. He/she is willing to act as extension worker/trainer in the community;
5. He/she is willing to make available his/her farm as demonstration area/or hands-on learning site; and
6. Physically and mentally fit to perform his/her responsibilities.

The Learning Site

1. Accredited TESDA agricultural schools or LGU owned farms
2. Private farms
3. Established FFS sites
4. At least one hectare in size
5. Accessible by land and other transportation facilities
6. With potentials for agri-business-eco-tourism site

Since the farmer’s time and efforts will be used in serving his fellow farmers and other interested people in farming, the following incentives may be provided:

1. Monthly allowance as local extension worker from the LGU or other ATI partners;
2. Start-up capital of not less than \$1,200 or no more than \$2,400 to help develop his farm from the LGU or ATI;
3. Life insurance coverage of \$1,200 to \$2,400 from ATI and the Philippine Crop Insurance Corporation (PCIC)
4. Farmer will be eligible for accreditation from TESDA as competent trainer/extension worker and his/her farm as an accredited learning site; and

5. Possible social security coverage (if funding allows) for future retirement benefits.

The First SPA in Community Seed Banking

South Cotabato is nurturing a humble but great person which can be considered probably one of the country's natural treasures in the person of Mr. Perfecto "Ka Peks" Vicente, who recently died.

Ka Peks was 78 years old farmer-scientist who hailed from Pangasinan. He was a former Professor of the University of the Philippines and researcher who found solace in continuing his advocacy in rice breeding and organic farming in South Cotabato. Ka Peks notable contribution in serving and developing our traditional rice varieties through organic farming using his own ingenuity of which he was awarded a Gawad Geny Lopez, Jr. Bayanihang Pilipino Award and Lifetime Achievement Award from Masipag Foundation in 2004.

During the first few months in office of the Secretary of the DA, Secretary Proceso J. Alcala, he made sure he never forget to look back to this great man who silently worked to advance the cause of the farming sector. In November of 2010, Secretary Alcala rewarded him a special Secretary's Award during the 7th National Organic Agriculture Conference. Their meeting again followed when the Secretary personally visited him in his residence in December of the same year.

The Secretary's visit paved the way for other agencies to look into his efforts and make ways to further his initiatives. One of these institutions that immediately responded is the ATI. This author as ATI Director believed that Ka Peks legacy should be passed on to other farmers and extension workers through appropriate extension modality. The ATI acknowledged Ka Peks expertise and experience being a researcher as well as resource person to many training programs in rice breeding, seed banking and organic farming. That is why during the first visit to Ka Peks in February of 2011, the author mentioned his plan to put up a practical school for the farmer-scientist to showcase the research technologies in the farm and to develop Ka Peks farm as a practical learning site and a farm-tourism place for local tourists to visit.

In September 2011, the Practical School was completed and inaugurated. The Practical School was constructed attached to the original house of Ka Peks. It is a two story structure with a training/meeting space as well as sleeping quarters. Surrounding the practical school is a one-hectare rice field which serves as the demonstration area or learning site. This SPA is already being used by farmers, OSYs, students, among others as a center for learning in organic rice breeding and seed banking. This is the first SPA established by ATI in the entire country. After this, many as ATI continue to pursue its program in building the farmers' assets and investing in the OSYs.

It is expected that various SPA are established all over the country, and it will be hands-on or practical learning sites of rural youths who are students of the ladderized course on agricultural entrepreneurship.

In his acceptance speech, Ka Peks said "I have no means to ask for anything. I only relied on the kind hearted people who visited me and saw what I am doing. This is not for me as I may soon be gone but the farmers must be assisted because most of them are poor. If we will not help them, food security will not be attained." Truly, even Ka Peks has been gone, his legacy lived forever. The SPA that was established remains to flourish and is still being visited. This time, his daughter continues what his father has done.

Ka Peks legacy to teach the farmers to produce their own seeds is still evident up to this day. He wants the farmers to use the farm school he built and established. The farm school also serves as an information and reading center where farmers can access information, read materials about farming, especially rice breeding. Together with the farmers in the area, Ka

Peks was able to produce traditional rice varieties. This way, rice farming in the Philippines will be sustainable and Filipino farmers are not dependent with traders, input suppliers and creditors for their seeds because they will be able to produce them.

LADDERIZED COURSE FOR THE OSYs

As mentioned, poverty is very pronounced in the rural areas. This condition hinders many rural youths from pursuing higher education and even employment opportunities. Though the rural youths may have finished secondary education yet they are not prepared for the world of work.

Many college bound students see no future in agriculture. This is because even farmers themselves discourage their children from pursuing an agriculture degree if they have the opportunity to study college. Compounding the problem is the fact that existing agricultural high schools do not offer many options. This is because of a standardized secondary curriculum that does not offer livelihood skills relevant to the needs in rural communities. This therefore bring to fore the need for a program that allows hands-on agriculture education with special focus on entrepreneurship and farm management. Under this program the students will be at the same time learning and earning.

The ATI with the Foundation for People Development (FPD) takes the lead in establishing the Farm Schools Network to support the training program for farm entrepreneurs. Moreover, with the establishment of the SPA by ATI in cooperation with farmers who were trained as trainers/extension workers in partnership with SUCs plus the participation of TESDA in the certification system, the ladderized course on agri-entrepreneurship is well in place.

The ladderized program for the OSYs who are members of the 4-H Club of the Philippines will improve the links between secondary education, the agricultural communities and business by assisting rural communities in designing self-sustaining, community-based and agriculture-focused school-to-work programs. This will also entail close collaboration between farms as industry training partners and schools which offer farm entrepreneurship program.

The curriculum under the ladderized program follows the regular secondary curriculum of the Department of Education (DepEd). The bridging school-to-work program entails an additional two (2) years to the high school curriculum and thus combines a secondary and post-secondary program now leading to a Diploma. During the additional two-year Diploma course, students shall go through an intensive on-the-job training program that will afford them hands-on exposure to various agriculture enterprises. The students will also supplement their studies by enrolling in various e-learning courses offered by ATI under its electronic-Extension otherwise called as e-Extension Program.

This post-secondary program (plus 2 years) shall be implemented under TESDA's Dual Training System (DTS). Graduates who shall pass TESDA's certification examinations shall also earn a national competency certificate in crops, horticulture, animal and poultry production, aquaculture as well as organic and natural farming system.

Students under this program will be awarded scholarships by ATI to undergo a two-year Diploma Course using the DTS. Graduates of the Program who wish to continue their studies for a college degree may qualify to apply to the Bachelor of Science in Entrepreneurial Management or a BS in Agricultural Entrepreneurship. Scholarships will then be provided by ATI under its Youth Agriculture and Fisheries Program.

There are at the moment two on-going ladderized courses promoted by ATI and the FPD:

Case 1: Diploma on Agriculture Entrepreneurship. This is offered by the MERALCO Foundation Inc. Farm Business School in partnership with the University of Rizal System, and the ATI which funded the program towards Bachelor of Science in Entrepreneurial Management major in Farm Business. For every semester of four (4) months, only one (1) month is spent for classroom instructions while the other three (3) months will be hands-on learning in partner farm schools. At the end of the year the student will take a competency examination administered by TESDA on the field the student is exposed in that particular year.

Case 2: Diploma in Eco-Farm Tourism Entrepreneurship. This is offered by the Western Philippine University in Puerto Princesa City towards a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Entrepreneurship major in Eco-Farm Tourism. Similar to the first case, students will have both classroom and actual hands-on exercises in the farms. After which he/she will take the competency examination from TESDA. Again, this program is through the partnership with FPD, ATI, WPU, the two congressional districts of Palawan, the City Government of Puerto Princesa, the Palawan Provincial Government, TESDA, Palawan Experiment Station, SAKA Foundation, and the 12 Farm Schools partners.

Under the ladderized program, the students will be at least able to engage in an agricultural enterprise in case he /she will not be able to complete the two-year program provided a semester is completed or finished. This is because in every semester the students will experience a hands-on and practical learning exposure to a certain agricultural enterprise at the same time pass a competency examination administered by TESDA.

YOUTH IN AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES PROGRAM (YAFP)

Under this program, the DA through the ATI endeavored to offer a scholarship program that is open to all deserving children of farmers and fishers to pursue studies and professional career in agriculture and fisheries. The program enlisted the expertise of SUCs in providing quality education for the scholars who must be children of small holder farmers and fishers. The DA-ATI believes that by providing scholarship it will attract young talented persons to pursue studies and professional career in agriculture and fisheries. Scholarships shall be provided through SUCs as well as private colleges and universities. The scholarship program covers Bachelor's Degree in agriculture, fisheries and other agriculture-related sciences which shall be granted through schools/universities/institutions.

The following are the general criteria of eligibility:

1. He/she must be a son/daughter of a bonafide small-scale farmers/fishers;
2. The parents/guardians having a gross annual income of not more than \$2,600;
3. He/she must not be more than 30 years old at the time of application to the program;
4. The applicant must not have been a delinquent scholar of a previous scholarship;
5. He/she must be willing to apply in the field of specialization that conforms with the DA-ATI priority agriculture related commodity or discipline;
6. He/she must have passed the entrance/qualifying examination prescribed by the University/College where he/she intends to enroll;
7. Prospective scholars who have stopped schooling may apply to finish his/her course;
8. Must have complied/submitted the following documentary requirements:
 - a. ATI Regional Training Center certification/endorsement

- b. Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) income tax return of the parents showing that their gross annual income is not more than \$2,600
- c. Birth Certificate specifying that the applicant is not more than 30 years old
- d. Certification from the Municipal Agriculture Office that the applicant is a son/daughter of a bonafide small scale farmer/fisher
- e. Certification of good moral character from the high school principal
- f. Admission slip from the university/college where he/she intends to study
- g. Medical certification of good health from an accredited hospital
- h. High school grades and diploma or in case of a graduate of a ladderized course, diploma from college/university where the scholar finished the course
- i. Certification from the municipal coordinator where the scholar resides that he/she is a 4-H Club member

Scholarship Privileges

The scholars under the YAFP shall have the following privileges:

- 1. Monthly stipend of \$140
- 2. Book allowance of \$35 per semester
- 3. Actual tuition and other school fees
- 4. Funding support to conduct research amounting to \$210 as a graduating student

OTHER PROGRAMS FOR THE YOUTH

Among the other programs implemented by the DA and the Institute in particular are:

- 1. Lowering of age requirement of 4-H Clubs membership from 15-30 years to 10-30 years old.
- 2. Gawad Saka Award for Young Farmers – a national award system to recognize young farmers
- 3. Gawad Saka Award for Young Farmer Organization – a national award system to recognize young farmer organizations usually 4-H Clubs
- 4. Learning and Discovery Center for Agriculture and Fisheries – a center which showcases various farming systems, extension strategies, value chain of some commodities, innovations in agricultural extension, and features various successful farmer entrepreneurs and their products. This serves as a venue for expository tours of elementary and high school students for them to appreciate agriculture.
- 5. Special hands-on (season-long trainings) for OSY with TESDA NC II Certification

e-EXTENSION PROGRAM FOR AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES AS A SUPPORT PROGRAM

e-Extension can be defined simply as the use of electronic technologies especially information and communication technologies or ICT to enhance face-to-face and paper based interactions. These technologies can be as simple as teleconferences or as complex as wikis and blogs. The e-Extension Program initiated by ATI is an aggressive shift in its extension work envisioning a revolutionized agriculture and fishery e-extension services for self-reliant and globally competitive communities that can be delivered any time, any place at any pace.

e-Extension is an electronic delivery of extension service of a network of institutions that provide a more efficient alternative to a traditional extension system for agriculture, fisheries and natural resources sectors. It focuses on creating an electronic and interactive bridge where farmers, fishers and other stakeholders meet and transact to enhance productivity, profitability and global competitiveness. It maximizes the use of ICT to attain a modernized agriculture and fisheries sector.

The DA-ATI's e-Extension Program has three (3) main components namely, e-Learning, e-Farming or the Farmers Contact Center and e-Trading. The e-Learning is of three (3) types, 1) online or through the use of the internet; 2) off-line which is offered to areas without connectivity; and 3) blended which is a combination of online and face to face interaction. It offers certificate courses equivalent to the traditional training courses offered in "as you know it" modality. Most often a course has two (2) to five (5) modules with sets of lessons per module and activities, assignments and assessments or tests.

Moreover, the e-Learning has on-call experts available for real time telephone consultation through message board or email or even text messaging or the short messaging system (SMS). Involvement of e-Learners is closely tracked by an e-Learning Coordinator. The outcome of the assessments or end-module tests will serve as basis for issuing Certificate of Completion. During the first year of implementation, learners are required to complete this course in two (2) to three (3) months. Today, e-learning courses are on a rolling mode and no time restrictions. Learners can learn any time, at their own pace.

There are more or less forty (40) pool of courseware developers in e-Learning. Thirty (30) of these developers are stationed at ATI and the others are from the Bureau of Agricultural Research (BAR), Department of Science and Technology – Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (DOST-PCAARRD), Xavier University, among others. These e-Learning courses are also offered in all the Regional Training Centers of ATUI as well as in PAES and the various Farmers Information and Technology Services (FITS) Centers in the LGUs.

Farmers' Contact Center (FCC)

The FCC is a support center for the DA's clients to deliver farm and business advisory services through ICT. It involves voice call and short messaging system modes through a pre-defined toll-free number specified across the country including chat and email.

Electronic Trading (e-Trading)

The e-Trading component is the last and final component of the e-Extension Program. It capacitates farmers and farmers' groups or associations to produce quality products according to the need of the market or the consumers. It is patterned along the Market Maker system espoused by the United States Department of Agriculture through Cornell University. To date, the system is still being developed and farmers and farmers' groups are being capacitated as well as markets are identified. Once the system is in place, it is hoped that farmers will have the command of the prices of their products and consumers will be assured that the agricultural products that they are buying are not only at reasonable prices but are also safe and truly nutritious.

This means, there will be traceability of all agricultural products sold in the markets. Consumers will know where the products came from and who produced the products they bought from the market.

GROW LOCAL, EAT LOCAL MOVEMENT

The grow local, eat local movement is another support program for our farmers and was launched on September 2011 at Puerto Princesa City, Palawan. It is a joint project of the ATI and FPD. The main objective of the movement is to encourage Filipinos to grow and patronize food produced near their place. It is also an initiative to address food security of each town, city or province.

Among the benefits expected to be derived from the movement are the following:

1. Lower food prices
2. Reduce import bill and create ready markets for Filipino farmers
3. Increased income of local farmers
4. Reduce carbon footprint due to savings from food miles
5. Localization of food production and consumption of fresh and healthy food
6. Encourage the youth by making them realize that agribusiness entrepreneurship is a career option

Expected to join the movement are farmers and farmer groups, restaurants, hotels, resorts, supermarkets, hospitals, offices and individual consumers. Civic groups, professional associations, foundations, non-government organizations and tour operators can also participate in the movement. The movement will be promoted and included in its component are weekend markets, farmers' markets, food exchanges and packing centers, and "community supported agriculture" via subscription farming. These will all lead to the establishment of a local food system that will benefit both consumers and producers.

CONCLUSION

Unlike in advanced and well-developed economies in the world, Philippine agriculture and fisheries sector has much to be desired. Unfortunately, not too many people in the Philippines are interested in farming especially the youth.. If ever some young people will engage in farming, it is because they were forced by circumstance. But given other options, these youths will prefer to venture in other activities other than agriculture.

The desolate situation in agriculture can be turned around if government and the private sector will work together and come-up with programs that will afford those that will engage in it bright opportunities through higher and secured income. Hence, much will power is needed. Since, agriculture is a science, it therefore has to be nurtured by developing the attitudes and character of those who will engage in it. It is by building the farmers' capabilities and investing in the OSY that we can hope for a developed and progressive sector. It cannot be one after the other. It should be simultaneous to have synergy as the farmers hand over to the OSYs as their future successors the knowledge, skills and values they learned from their ancestors and years of experience.

On the other hand, the government and the private sector should formulate the needed policies and put-up infrastructures that will facilitate the achievement of the dreams and

aspirations of those engaged in fishing and farming that eventually will change them to have better lives. Again, the development of Philippine agriculture hinges in building farmers' assets and investing in the OSYs.

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