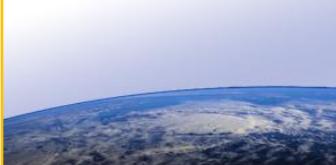


## An economic sustainability project in response to the pandemic

# An Integral, Ecological Agriculture

Mary Ann Tolentino

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Philippines went into lockdown for a month. Living hand-to-mouth, many said to themselves, "If we stay home, maybe we won't die of the virus, but we will die of hunger." A Focolare Movement community in the Philippines took seriously the challenge of the plight of the most vulnerable to help them achieve what they needed to ensure their survival.



Since 1987, the Aklan Focolare community, in the central-west province of the Philippines, has tried to be there in support of those most on the margins of society. We have worked with church organizations and local government units to help the needy, including some indigenous communities left without land to cultivate because of industrialization.

Faced with the pandemic and the plight of our people, we could not turn our backs. God responded to our concerns when Italian friends from the Bassano del Grappa and Marostica regions sent help. This allowed for the immediate provision of food for 108 families, and the responses written by the children of these families are truly heartwarming.

### The beginnings

We knew, however, that we would not be able to supply rice provisions indefinitely. A Chinese proverb says, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed

him for a lifetime."

We felt the need to develop a sustainable plan that would allow these families to survive. We prayed to God to inspire and guide us. As we distributed the food, we tried to take note of their current situation. Some of their homes had small vegetable gardens. By providing agricultural training and tools, their gardens could yield a greater harvest. We immediately set out to do this. Initially, we started with 20 villagers who were among those in the direst economic straits. But then the circle widened to include families from other municipalities, and we organized five training courses for more than forty families.

This activity has become an opportunity to interact with the local government and the diocese. The priest for the Aeta tribe, for example, now works with us to extend this training

to indigenous people as well.

But more funds were needed to go ahead. Thanks to the help of our friends from Italy and abroad, as well as in the Philippines, we were quickly able to acquire the amount needed to further expand the project.

### **What is our goal?**

The main objective has always been clear: Create relationships in which we can be brothers and sisters to one another, children of the one Father. Therefore, it was not enough to feed the hungry or provide them with the means to feed themselves, as the Chinese proverb says. We set out to create a community of persons as in a family, where everything is shared: needs, riches, joys, and difficulties, like the first Christian community in Jerusalem, where "there no one was in need". The goal is for each one is to grow in the different aspects of life and thus be fulfilled, putting into action evangelical, mutual love.

In addition to caring for people, we also strive to care for the environment. Farm work made us rediscover our connection with mother earth and the food it generates for us. We make sure that what we grow is organic so as not to harm the environment. Planting is an act of reciprocity between humans and nature.

We decided on general goals together: To ensure that no families around us go to sleep at night with empty stomachs; help people rediscover their dignity as children of God; live the culture of giving and receiving; maximize human potential for financial sustainability; and care for the environment and all creation.

Among more specific goals: Learning agricultural techniques through training and material support; Ensure health and wellness through integral formation: technological, cultural, human, relational and spiritual; and to experience being a part of one family.

To our surprise, in those very days Pope Francis himself spoke about integral economics. It seemed like a 'program' for us:

"Sharing with the poor means mutual enrichment. [...] we can nurture an economy of the integral development of the poor, and not of providing assistance. [...] we must go beyond this, to resolve the problems that lead us to provide aid [...]. The preferential option for the poor, this ethical-social need that comes from God's love (cf. LS, 158) inspires us to conceive of and design an economy where people, and especially the poorest, are at the centre."<sup>1</sup>

### **Latest developments**

Last August, the launch of the farming project took place in a poor part of Jumarap, Banga (in Aklan), at a farm whose manager wanted to share his knowledge about organic farming and associated technologies. For an entire day, we gathered with those who wanted to learn - using our meager resources for transportation, lunch and the necessary materials for home horticulture. There was a shared enthusiasm among all for this first training.

Soon, this first group to learn the new growing techniques was joined by others. Due to the lockdown, it was not easy to organize training sessions because those most in need had no Internet to take online classes. Nevertheless, we managed to organize several courses in

organic farming, ornamental gardening, pig farming and the processing of cocoa products. Tools could be provided to thirty families for land cultivation and watering systems. A microcredit system to help others start small businesses is also being established.

### **Witness of a participant**

*I am 29 years old and was invited to the organic farming training. The training gave me more knowledge on how to grow vegetables for a better harvest. I was overjoyed when, towards the end, they handed out tools and seeds to all participants. I went home and planted the seeds right away. And, after three months I started harvesting vegetables from my garden.*

*After four years together, my partner left me. I worked hard raising poultry and made about 2,000 pesos (39 US dollars) monthly, but there was no way out of poverty.*

*During the training, I saw the organizers' sincerity in helping people like myself. I found new hope and will work hard to help my family out of poverty. For now, I live in a small hut with my parents, three married sisters, and several nieces and nephews. Our small vegetable garden, though, is not ours. Although I always live in fear that one day the owner will need it and send us away, I dream of having a land where we can build our future. Every day, I thank God for this spiritual family that is there beside me, helping to make my dream come true.*

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis. General Audience, Augusts 19, 2020