



Women Contributing to Food Sovereignty through Sustainable Agriculture

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ABSTRACT. There is a growing consensus among advocates in the Philippines that promoting organic or ecological farming plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is considered here as a technological approach and system of production that takes care of the needs not only of the present but also of the future generations without putting at risk the environment and people's health. This paper presents how Sarilaya, a women's organization, attempts to put the above concepts into practice with its sustainable agriculture project in Barangay Imelda Valley in Palayan City located within the province of Nueva Ecija in Luzon Island.

KEYWORDS. sustainable agriculture · women's movement · ecological farming

INTRODUCTION

Ecological farming ensures sustainability and safety unlike conventional farming systems dependent on synthetic agrichemicals and, increasingly, on genetically engineered seeds. Many advocates contend that the ecological approach can ensure food security by making available sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for all households, and provide all people at all times physical and economic access to such food. Extending the discourse further, one can argue that sustaining access to safe and quality food is necessary to achieving food sovereignty.¹ At the same time, can women, who suffer the most under the poverty situation resulting from conventional farming, help provide a way to ensure food security for their households and contribute to achieving food sovereignty in the long run? In this paper, we discuss how Sarilaya (Kasarian-Kalayaan [Gender-Freedom]) attempts to put the above concepts into practice with its sustainable agriculture project in Barangay Imelda Valley.

THE IMELDA VALLEY PROJECT

Imelda Valley is located in Palayan City, Nueva Ecija. It has a land area of 206 hectares, of which 80 percent is devoted to upland agriculture, with most farms non-irrigated or rain-fed. Crops are mostly vegetables, and only a small area is devoted to rice production.

The project started in 2002 and is rooted in Sarilaya's vision of a "safe, beautiful, orderly, and clean environment, and a developed community" with organic farming as one of the specific means to implement such vision. In this particular experience, women are in charge. The project seeks to address the lack of irrigation, the long-term soil-nutrient depletion, and the soaring prices of synthetic inputs that have negative impact on household incomes. These three factors have resulted in greater impoverishment of rural families, which in turn have pushed women and their children to seek other means of livelihood or work abroad. In addition, they have added to women's multiple burdens, ill health, and even violence.

Sarilaya turned to sustainable agriculture as a way out of the grinding poverty that agrichemical farming brought into this village. The project focuses on producing sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for the households. The families themselves, with the women at the lead, provide role models for those that would like to act in sync with them toward achieving such goals.

SHIFTING TO ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

From the onset, it was an uphill battle for the women to convince their husbands to shift to organic farming. In the Philippine culture, the breadwinner is the father, and farming is one of the main sources of not only food but also income for the family. At the end of the day, there came the issue: who between husband and wife would decide to agree on what? Associated with this dilemma was the challenge of reaching an agreement on how to adopt a new technology away from the "instant"—that is, less laborious—chemical farming in favor of the more labor-intensive sustainable agriculture method. The agroclimatic condition of the farms situated in a rain-fed upland area with no system of irrigation also presented added doubt on whether the technology could be successfully adopted.

The women had to go through a trial-and-error process in planting the right crops at the right time, intercropping, rotating, combining,

and sequencing crops in the proper way, and using the open-pollinated seed varieties more than the hybrid and finding where to source them. They had to learn land and seedling preparation; composting and putting in the right amount of compost fertilizers into the crop beds; mulching and watering the plants; making foliar from fermented banana trunk, fruits, and fish; spraying foliar at the right time and frequency; pest management using herbs and plants instead of chemicals; and seed banking for the next cropping cycle. At harvest time, the entire household got involved in segregating good produce from rejects and helped in selling either directly to consumers or through the market.

After eight years of hard work, the nineteen households in Imelda Valley that participated in the project now enjoy homegrown quality food with the concomitant result of preventing or reducing the incidence of illness and disease. Today, women in the community play an active role in deciding what to plant and where to market their products. They are also demonstrating how to sustain their community seed banking and seed quality control, and produce their own inputs such as compost and foliar fertilizers. With less expenses on commercial inputs, net incomes have improved dramatically, which in turn lessened women's burden and even eliminated, in some cases, the need to seek other employment.

Furthermore, the nurturing touch of women in the Imelda Valley has extended from caring for their families to protecting the environment. With diversified integrated farming system in place in the community, which includes livestock, vegetables, fruits, and herbal plant production, the Imelda Valley case has shown that food security and sovereignty can be achieved even in the most difficult situations, with women providing the inspiration and leadership.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are significant lessons to learn from the women's experience in Imelda Valley. First, women can effect change in their family and community outlook and way of life and help sustain this in the long run. This is very remarkable against the backdrop of poverty and apathy that characterize farming communities and households engaged in agrichemical or conventional farming, and also in the context of a prevailing patriarchal culture that assumes male superiority in deciding family economics and life. In this project, women ensured that their

families and community would join in to avoid unnecessary conflict situations that could lead to unproductive results if not outright failure of the project. Women showed that they knew better, and despite difficulties they prevailed. They also showed that women could effect positive change as well as anyone else if they got their acts together and engaged their husbands, families, and community in effecting change.

The Sarilaya experience has indicated that sustainable agriculture with organic farming as main strategy is not only ecologically but also economically viable as an alternative to agrichemical farming, as a reduction of up to 40 percent in production costs after the implementation of the project has been observed. Further, the benefits of organic farming have extended even beyond economic considerations such as added income and less expenses on food (10-40 percent of their family needs, depending on the size of the land area used) to health issues as it has provided sufficient, nutritious, and safe food for the families in the Imelda Valley.

The Imelda Valley project, in fact, can be considered as an initial foreshadowing at the micro level of the shift to “novel agri-food systems emphasizing local/decentralized food production, and seasonal consumption expectations, from minimally processed foods” (Clark 2010). In addition, it shows that beyond the shift to organic farming, there was a need to integrate livestock and long-term perennials with annual short-term crops, “both to mimic the principles that sustain Nature and to dramatically reduce dependence on fossil fuels” (Clark 2010).✿

NOTE

1. Food sovereignty is here defined, using the Declaration of Nyéléni, as “the right of the people to democratically decide how their own foods are locally produced,” including “the right of food producers to productive resources to have access to land, water, seeds and technology and credit” and the right to decide on their food and agricultural policies”...and “the right to produce sustainably and ecologically to ensure the right to food of every woman, man and child in the planet” (Forum for a New World Governance 2007).

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ESPERANZA "PANGGING" SANTOS is a founding member of Sarilaya. Presently she is a member of Sarilaya's executive committee as well as its national advocacy officer. She is also a health and wellness practitioner and advocate. Sarilaya was established in 1994 as an organization of women-development catalysts committed to promoting women empowerment and gender equality. Sarilaya promotes a socialist-ecofeminist development agenda, and its mission is to mainstream gender and development in every member's workplace, community, and broader movement for social change.

MARGIE LACANILAO is Sarilaya's first sustainable agriculture practitioner and trainer. She is one of the founding mothers of Imelda Livelihood Association of Women (ILAW). She has also been an active Sarilaya leader-member since 1996.