

For Bago City farmers, certainty and hope

It not only increased production but it also gave the farmers hope," remarks Rosemary Caunca, 71, the President of PASELOMAK Irrigators Association in Bago City, the so-called "rice bowl" of Negros Occidental province.

Negros Occidental is the Philippines' biggest producer of sugar, and has few areas that produce rice. The crucial difference between cultivation of the two crops is sufficiency of water.

"In the past, you didn't know when you would have water," Mrs. Caunca adds. "There was so much uncertainty. Now we have certainty."

With a JICA loan of 4.298 billion yen, or about 1.87 billion pesos, the National Irrigation Administration rehabilitated and improved the old irrigation system from the Bago River, building concrete channels — a 29.7-kilometer main canal and 131 kilometers in lateral canals—where there had been irregular, earthen passages.

The system now serves almost 12,000 hectares of land and 1,325 hectares not previously served, in three cities and four towns to which the project also built high-quality connecting roads.

For 10,000 farmers, the improvement was easily quantifiable. The average rainy-season production grew 2.5 times and the dry-season output nearly tripled. Their average income almost doubled, to more than 80,900 pesos a year.

Gerry Corsiga, the Project Manager for the Bago River Irrigation System Rehabilitation and Improvement Project, says that with an increase in awareness and technical know-how, farmers could even triple their output and diversify to other crops.

"If you multiply the benefits given here to cover other parts of the Philippines, the agricultural production losses will be offset," Gerry says.

The project taught farmers the technical aspects of irrigation and organized them into 44 irrigators associations (IA). After further training, the IA will manage and operate the irrigation system.

About 700 to 800 farmers had helped to build the concrete canals with their own hands, at their respective sections of the irrigation system.

One of them was Neil Ravillo, who is now the President of SABALA Irrigators Association with 172 members.

With a carabao, Neil plows a one hectare farm that he had inherited from his father, who in turn inherited it from Neil's grandfather. But 41-year-old Neil is no ordinary farmer.

Neil took a two-year university course and is an Associate in Agriculture. He worked for 18 years with local units of multinational corporations and with government agencies as a field demonstrator or a farm manager.

But, when home from the day jobs, he was a farmer. ("I'm really happy farming," it was his childhood ambition, he says.)



Project Manager **Gerry Corsiga** (fourth from left) with **Neil Ravillo** (third from left) and other project members

When other farmers in their village ask him of his crop, "How did you do that?" he instructs them on land preparation, water use, composting, and choice of seedlings (hybrid seeds grow 40 to 60 "branches" on one rice stalk, he says, compared with 7 to 14 from ordinary seeds).

Neil has measured another aspect of the benefits from the Bago River Irrigation System Rehabilitation and Improvement Project. The concrete canal not only assures the farmers of their water supply. The water flow, Neil says, takes only an hour to run seven kilometers, compared with one or two days when they had only an earthen canal.

His neighbors have increased their incomes, he says, some more than he has.

An IA officer is "half-farmer and half-manager," says Mrs. Caunca, whose section of the canal has 256 beneficiaries in three villages.

Mrs. Caunca has three farms totaling 3.3 hectares, with a caretaker for each, but she is no ordinary farm owner.

She is a retired Negros Occidental provincial director of the Philippine Department of Interior and Local Government. She lives in the capital, Bacolod City, and travels 36 kilometers daily to her IA office although, she says, "we officers are just volunteers."

"Our concern is how to maintain the momentum and interest of the farmers," Mrs. Caunca says, including payment of the irrigation service fee so the association can attend to their needs.

"Now we are working together," she says. Farmers come to the IA office to pay the fee, and her IA has a 100 percent collection rate, she adds.

Mrs. Rosemary Caunca

