

Suyo-Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan Road Project: Journey to Unbeaten Paths

Right in front of the Cervantes Municipal Hall is the hustle and bustle of local merchants peddling their dry goods and vegetables. It was a farmers' market day in the town of Cervantes, Ilocos Sur, signaling the vibrancy of the town's local commerce.

Bosito Manuel, a chieftain in Barangay Comillas in Cervantes said, "Marami sa amin ay farmers. Malaki ang naitulong na maganda na ang daan dito at mas mabilis na naming naiba-byahe ang mga produkto namin." (We are a farming community. Now that the road is constructed, we can now transport our goods faster).

Farmers in Comillas harvest rice, vegetables, corn and sell them to nearby trade posts like Abatan, Benguet. The newly paved Suyo-Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan Road has become an important agricultural route in the area.

Alfredo Cabradilla, a chieftain in Barangay Aluling in Cervantes said, "Mas maikli ang byahe namin papunta sa Tagudin and malimit na ding makagpagbyahe ang mga sasakyan. Marami na ring negosyante galing sa labas ang nakakapagbenta ng dry goods dito." (We now have shorter travel time going to Tagudin and public transportation is now available in different times of day. Other businessmen can now also sell their dry goods here).

Meanwhile, in Urzadan, Suyo, Ilocos Sur, townsfolk had to deal with the harsh gravel route before the construction of the Suyo-Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan Road.

The teacher in charge of one of the oldest schools in that part of Ilocos -- Urzadan Elementary School, Ms. Rudsona Biligan recalled,

"...an improved road system also drives a community's economic activities"
- DPWH Engineer Jose Bustamante

"Pag maulan, inaalalis na lang ng mga bata ang sapatos nila dahil maputik ang daan." (During rainy season, students would remove their shoes on their way to school since it's muddy.)

But that was then.

Now, the paved road is a marvel in itself against the backdrop of green mountains and slopes.

The road project was an initiative of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) through the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) loan project before their merger. The project, completed in 2009 (Suyo-Cervantes) and 2010 (Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan), facilitated the movement of people and goods in the region, faster and safer.

It is not just the mobility, but even farmers and merchants from farming villages like Urzadan can now peddle their avocados, bananas, and other farm products to nearby towns to provide for their livelihood and boost the local economy.

"Roads are vital to a community's economic welfare. Already, a public market is being built along the Suyo-Cervantes Road section few meters away from nearby communities like Urzadan. This only shows that an improved road system also drives a community's economic activities," said DPWH Engineer Jose Bustamante, also the project leader of the Suyo-Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan project team.

The project is proof that the unbeaten path in road development is indeed surmountable with the firm commitment and resolve of all relevant stakeholders.

Following the completion of the road project, the DPWH also donated their on-site offices to serve as additional classrooms in Urzadan. "We donated our offices in the field to the schools in Urzadan and Mankayan as additional support to the communities," shared DPWH Engineer Choy Kabilang.

The Suyo-Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan Road Link is also a heritage highway linking the Spanish colonial towns of Ilocos Sur to the indigenous communities in the Cordillera. For the residents of Cordillera region, the road has become a faster route to Ilocos Sur. It is also an alternate route every time the Halsema Highway, a mountainous trail leading to the North is closed to traffic because of landslides.

Mayor Materno Luspian of Mankayan, Benguet said, "Aside from facilitating economic activities especially for farmers in Benguet, the road project also impacts on the tourism in Mankayan so tourists can explore our golf courses, and eventually our organic vegetable plantations."

JICA-DPWH road project allows better connectivity for tourists and merchants

To this day, memories of the old, harsh routes from Ilocos Sur to Benguet Province have been replaced by the vast stretch of the newly paved road. The project is proof that the unbeaten path in road development is indeed surmountable with the firm commitment and resolve of all relevant stakeholders.

An 81-year old man, Mang Carlito of Barangay Urzadan said, "Maganda na ang daan. Yung kagaya ko pwede nang mag-jogging. Yung apo ko din madali na nakakauwi galing sa Tagudin kung saan siya nag-aaral." (The road is better now. People my age could jog on the road. My grandson can now easily commute from a college in Tagudin where he studies).

Journeying through the Suyo-Cervantes-Mankayan-Abatan road, one is tempted to experience the texture of life while also building memories along the way.

