Tetsuo Inooka, JICA chief advisor for DICCEP

The banana cluster is the most advanced. The industry has institutionalized it so it can enter into contracts, such as for bulk imports of farm inputs, and for export sales.

In October 2009, cluster team members led by Rene Dalayon were in Japan to see the banana process from ship to supermarket when they finalized a one-year contract with Marubeni Corporation for at least one container van of bananas every week. The order could not have been filled without the cluster, says Rene.

Another buyer is Marunaka Co., a chain of about 300 supermarkets. The farmers/ producers got a better price because the sale did not pass through a trading firm, Rene adds.

Better prices for farmers, steady supplies for processors, good product quality for exporters — "all of them are benefiting" from the clusters, says Magge Firmeza, Department of Trade and Industry project coordinator for DICCEP.

The clusters will grow bigger to include buyers, distributors and allied service providers, Magge adds.

At the coconut cluster, the plans, included model integrated farms to showcase high productivity. But even before that, DICCEP has given the farmers new skills, product ideas and know-how that have led to job opportunities for family members and others in their communities, says Vivian Lapuz, cluster team leader.

"There is now optimism for people whose lives have depended on coconut,"Vivian says. " I have personally witnessed the excitement, joy and sometimes emotional outburst when they realize the project delivers what it promises.

SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH

Enabling paths of great consequence

Chance and serendipity might have played a hand, as with most young people, but certainly depth and diversity of interests have placed Rea Carla Tanguilig on the way to what surely seems a bright future.

For many other intelligent youths, it can be a path of great consequence, as it merges high technology and environmental protection.

It is also a future that has its beginnings at the University of the Philippines Information Technology Training Center (UP-ITTC), a program of the university together with JICA.

Rea, 27 — pretty, mild-mannered, soft-spoken, and who likes origami, cooking, and creating various handicrafts — is a licensed chemical engineer. She received her bachelor's degree in 2004 from UP in Diliman, Quezon City.

At the time, thanks to a classmate, she had become interested in webpage development. In 2005, she happened to see an advertisement for IT training sponsored by JICA, which she knew to support projects at the UP Department of Engineering.

And then she found out that the JICA-supported UP-ITTC was offering both full-time and short courses.

UP ITTC, the first IT training center in the Philippines to be ISO 9001:2008-certified, complies with American Accreditation Standards and European Accreditation Standards.

Under a five-year program completed in July 2009, JICA provided UP with expert know-how for running an institution like ITTC. This included long-term services of Japanese experts: the chief advisor; an expert in management of an IT training institution, and in building industry partnerships; an expert in training and curriculum design, and in training development and implementation; and the project coordinator.

It also dispatched short-term experts as needed, and sent three faculty or staff members every year for technical training in Japan.

With the necessary knowledge imparted, JICA provided the needed hardware and software to be used in UP-ITTC: six servers, eight practice servers, 100 classroom desktop computers, 10 laptops for trainers, plus printers and other mechanical requirements.

When UP-ITTC opened in 2005, Rea was in the first batch. As expected, many of the other enrollees were graduates of computer science or other IT-related college courses, but some were like her who had a very different background.

There were graduates of European languages, molecular biology and biotechnology, philosophy, and political science, with government, academe, private industry, and NGOs in effect represented in the mix — the diversity highlighted the potential energies and talents that could be harnessed at UP-ITTC.


Rea Carla Tanguilig with classmates at UP-ITTC

As full-time participants, they took Nihongo lessons daily to prepare for Japanese language proficiency tests and they were primed for the difficult certification exam for Philippine National IT Standards - Fundamental IT Engineers.

Rea readily achieved what few have. After the UP-ITTC course, she received in 2006 both her Certificate in Information Technology and her Level 3 Japanese Language Proficiency Test certification.

"The most important thing I learned at UP- ITTC is that I can achieve anything through hard work and perseverance," Rea says.

"Before I attended UP-ITTC, my programming skill was not good," she adds. "After the course, it has greatly improved and I can say that what used to be my weakness is now an asset."

Being a successful UP-ITTC trainee has become well known to be a definite advantage for people applying for IT work, Rea says. Some of her former classmates are now in Japan or work with Japanese companies in the Philippines.

Rea currently works as a software engineer at Ubiquitous Technologies Philippines, an offshore IT development unit of a Japan-based corporation. At the same time, however, she is taking her master's in environmental engineering at UP in Diliman.

In this field, which includes wastewater treatment, solid waste management and other such increasingly significant concerns, Rea's thesis will likely involve software knowledge acquired at UP-ITTC. The subject is still under discussion but her adviser is proposing computer simulation for landfill emission or leaching.

Some of her former classmates at UP-ITTC have left for work abroad. She prefers to stay, or go abroad for a PhD after finishing her master's, and then come back to apply her learning in the Philippines. That would make her truly a young Filipino of great consequence.