



Young Changemakers: Achieving Change Through Local Actions

On October 13-15, Samdhana Institute and community partners celebrated the annual World Food Day, through the **LAMBO 2023** event at Limketkai Mall, Cagayan de Oro City. Part of the celebration was giving space for young people who are doing concrete initiatives to protect the environment and contribute in addressing food security.

On October 15, Samdhana in partnership with the Social Involvement and Advocacy Program of Xavier University (XU-SIAP) convened “Panagtagbo: Lambo Kabatan-onan!” with Indigenous youth and students.

Food for All

Kristal Noriz Ras is an agriculture student at Xavier University, and President of the campus organization, the Ateneo Crop Science Society (ACSS). While still studying, they are already trying to make a difference in communities in Cagayan de Oro City where they think their expertise is most needed.

They started by initiating a community garden in Canitoan, the *barangay* that hosted the relocation of residents who were hardest hit by Typhoon Sendong way back in December 2011.



Kristal Noriz Ras

“It’s a way of giving back to the community,” Kristal, who along with other young changemakers, shared their experiences in the youth forum that concluded LAMBO 2023. They aim to increase productivity for these families so they can have nutritious food especially for growing-up children.

But Kristal observed that in the city the problem is the lack of space for planting. This can be addressed by hydroponics and vertical farming. Hydroponics is the technique of growing plants using a water-based nutrient solution instead of soil, and can include an aggregate substrate, or growing media, such as vermiculite, coconut coir, or perlite. Vertical farming, as the name suggests, means farming on vertical surfaces, which is ideal for built-up areas that do not have farm lands.

Aside from community gardens, ACSS is initiating a food bank or community pantry. They ask people to donate food items that are otherwise meant for the garbage bin. “*Ang gagmay-gagmayng donation modaghan ra na* (Little donations will eventually grow),” she emphasized. At present, they are identifying the recipients and finding more volunteers, and developing an app called *Bilin* for this endeavor.

If Kristal had any misgiving, it's the future of food security, as many people tend to look down on agriculture or farming as a profession. “Farmers are stereotyped as poor. People would say ‘what would you do after graduating, plant’?” she said.

She observed the attitude toward farmers in the Philippines is different from Malaysia's. “There, the farmers are not being looked down upon, they embrace technology. Our youth should be encouraged to study agriculture and go into farming.”

Ezel Lambatan, who pioneered the Bayanihan sa Agrikultura para sa Kabatan-onan, Kaumahan ug Katubigan or BAKA program, shared Kristal's passion of mobilizing the youth to contribute toward food security.

According to a World Bank study, the average age of Filipino farmers is 57, a phenomenon that may have adverse implications to the country's food supply.

This, she said, prompted them to form a 4H Club chapter with initially 20 members who were developed to become servant leaders and entrepreneurs at the same time. They were trained in crop, fish, and livestock production, as well as in formulating value chain and business plans. Each business plan was given a P10,000 grant to be implemented within 26 months.

Seventeen of the members finished the training and were able to establish their small enterprises. One of them, Kokong, was one of the country's representatives to an 11-month learning exchange in Taiwan.

“Based on our one-year monitoring, they have collective sales of around P200,000 and counting,” she said, adding they are using the popular TikTok app for marketing and showing farm activities like the planting methods for certain crops. “Use social media for business purposes,” she advised.

Rica Dagapioso, one of the members, is earning P7,000 weekly from selling chicks alone. Rica received a grant of P200,000 from the Department of Agriculture for her business.



Ezel Lambatan



Keziah Mallorca

The Help for Undernourished Kids' Abilities and Development or HUKAD project of Xavier University appears to somehow complement the initiative of Kristal's group. Keziah Mallorca, who manages the project, said their aim is aligned with the second Sustainable Development Goal of the UN to achieve food security and improved nutrition for school children who are vulnerable to malnutrition and hunger.

She said HUKAD partnered with an elementary school in Cagayan de Oro where they provided free lunch five times weekly for two months to 64 Grade 2 children who were classified as "severely wasted" or suffering from acute malnutrition.

The intervention resulted in improved class attendance and attentiveness, improved body mass index, and normal nutritional status on the part of the children.

"We are planning to revive the project next year with more partners and schools, or maybe make it community-based by encouraging families to go into urban gardening," she added.

Conserving Nature, Strengthening Culture

While urban-based changemakers like Kristal, Ezel, and Keziah are advocating measures toward food sustainability, three indigenous youths are helping to change the landscape, literally, in their respective indigenous communities by involving themselves in nature conservation, cultural strengthening, and asserting their right to self-governance.

Karen Puasan, of the Dulangan Youth Group, said they have organized Higaonon youth in seven of the eight barangays in Opol and Manticao towns in Misamis Oriental, which composed their unified ancestral domain. Their aim as the young people of their tribe is to assist the elders in tribal governance.

Reah Ompigan, of *Neumpong ne mge Memenguhed te UKIMTRICO* of the Menuvu tribe, said their youth organizing among 48 clans in CADT 206 in Southern Bukidnon is being guided by their elders comprising the indigenous political structure.

Rey Glenn Cuyag, of Man-ai Indigenous Youth Community (MIYC) in Barangay Tignapoloan, Cagayan de Oro, said the youth in general are active in tribal activities. He, however, noted that some lack the interest in involving themselves while others are hindered by conflict of schedules as students.



Karen Puasan



Reah Ompigan



Rey Glenn Cuyag

Karen cited the same time management problem among their members who are students. This is aside from the fact that the distance of their community to the schools has made it difficult for parents who are earning little.

One thing common among the three IP youth groups is their enthusiasm to protect their ancestral domains through forest restoration. Through their community nurseries, they have planted several seedlings of indigenous tree species in their ancestral domains – around 2,000 in Dulangan, 4,000 to 5,000 in Sezukadang, and 6,000 in Man-ai and still counting. Aside from their own voluntary tree-growing activities, MIYC has donated seedlings to other civic organizations, public schools and other IP communities who did their own tree-growing.

In addition to the nursery, the IP youth in Man-ai has established a community garden with support from Samdhana. “During the pandemic we saw the importance of this community garden,” Rey said, alluding to the difficulty of obtaining food due to the prolonged lockdowns.

Another outstanding common characteristic is the value and pride they put into their identities as IPs. “Value your own culture, be proud of your tribe. I’m proud to say I’m a Higaonon,” Rey concluded.

