



courtesy of R. Baracena

## NUTRITION TRAINING PROJECT: THE SEED OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT



Rufina "Tia Pining"  
Baracena, a community  
leader of the nutrition  
training project

IT has been more than twenty years since the twelve women now gathered in the Parish of St. Bartholomew church in Baa0, Camarines Sur first got together for a nutrition training project that the Social Action Centre of the Archdiocese of Caceres, together with the Philippine Business for Social Progress, had initiated. At the time, the twelve mothers knew nothing of venturing into the public sphere, they admitted, but now they are smart and articulate, eager to contribute to a "focus group discussion" organized to retrace the nutrition training project and its impact on them and their families. They are assured each one will get her turn to share her story, and they go round robin.

The physical centre itself where they gathered at that time is now gone, and in its place is an additional wing of Baa0's public elementary school financed by the present congressman. But in 1981-1982 when Canada Fund supported the Applied Nutrition Centre, in the words of the women, the government was not focused on the people's needs, and it was private self-help initiatives such as the nutrition project that

“Nutrition mothers” helped government health workers conduct nutrition education and rehabilitation activities.



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The “nutrition mothers” attended nutrition education lessons, during which they learned basic health principles, developed low-cost recipes and organized a community kitchen.

equipped the poor families with the know-how to address the malnutrition of the children, and skills, capital and confidence to try out various poverty-alleviation ventures.

The project was built around the women belonging to five civic and church-based organizations in five barangays in Baao: San Jose, San Francisco, San Nicolas, Bulwang and La Medalla. In the beginning the applied nutrition project was focused on the health aspect. The “nutrition mothers” – volunteers assisting professional health staff for the nutrition education and rehabilitation activities – attended at least eight nutrition education lessons in a span of one month, during which they learned basic nutrition and health principles, developed low-cost recipes using backyard resources, and organized a community kitchen. They were also given cooking demonstrations. In the next years, many “nutrition mothers,” who were in their 20s and 30s, would ask for refresher courses. An eight-day seminar in family meal management was developed and conducted with them.

### **Nutrition as Starting Point**

At the time, a pre-project survey indicated that 67 percent of the children in the communities suffered varying degrees of malnutrition. Eighty-five percent of the entire population suffered varying degrees of tuberculosis due to malnutrition, lack of basic education (the average educational attainment of the nutrition mothers was four years of primary education), lack of health and sanitation, and poverty in general. The survey also noted a common practice in the municipality of retiring late in the night, which aggravated the people’s poor health.

Money to put food  
on the table  
seemed always in  
short supply, and  
the mothers  
seemed  
perpetually  
harassed.

“We just didn’t know anything then,” Jelly Brisenio, who is now active in the municipal health office’s outreach projects said. A nutrition mother who was a registered midwife, Jelly did not know her eldest was malnourished. But with years of involvement with the nutrition project behind her, Jelly now lends her experience to the government in childcare, in weighing children and assessing the extent of malnutrition of a child, and in monitoring the progress of rehabilitation, including the maintenance of weight charts.

Another mother will never forget a lesson from the training she received – that peanuts, which grow abundantly in the area, and are often taken for granted, are “brain food.”

Through such information, education and communication efforts, the mothers also saw the sense in keeping backyard vegetable gardens. Together with the community leaders, they also held a vigorous door-to-door sanitation campaign to enrol the households in repairing the villages’ drainage and the construction of sealed toilets.

The project, through the support of Catholic Relief Services, also included supplemental feeding of the children from time to time. Soya, rice, corn, wheat and skimmed milk – “aid” from industrialized countries – were occasionally distributed to the households, based on family size. Community feeding of the children where mothers would prepare meals from local anchovies (*dilis*), rice broth or *gabi* (toro roots) or *malunggay* (moringa leaves) leaves was also done.

### Comprehensive Approach

The project became the takeoff point for the livelihood ventures that individual households engaged in. Nutrition rehabilitation, to be successful,



The women became secure in themselves, in their families, and in their participation in community development.



Then and now: Two nutrition mothers deep in paperwork twenty years ago (*above*) and now in their “more comfortable” years (*right*)



had to be grounded on the parents’ ability to meet the children’s food requirements, and this implied accelerating economic development. Capital was made available through a cooperative banking system where the mothers were organized in smaller groups for more systematic collection of the loans extended to them. These were used mainly for the embroidery of the mothers – a common activity among the women in Baao, as well as animal raising (rabbit and hog raising and breeding). “The rabbits,” said one mother, “were what got my children to school.” She recalls selling the rabbits at Php100 (Cdn\$2.88) a head at the time. She continues to raise them, and they now sell for Php500 (Cdn\$15.28) a head. The other mothers call her the “rabbit expert,” as she can rival any formally schooled agriculture technician in caring for rabbits.

Some of those who opted for swine raising, like Rufina “Tia Pining” Baracena, the group’s acknowledged leader, have also managed to sustain their small business ventures. They credit the longevity of these to the subsequent training they were given in leadership, business management and organizational development.

### **Irreplaceable Samahan**

But the nutrition mothers, many of them now grandmothers, value most the enduring relationships and confidences built through the years. One of them enjoyed particularly the “collective cooking,” for during these times, they worked hard, true, but they also enjoyed one another’s company and the exchange of confidences. The *samahan* (solidarity) catalyzed during the project, they stressed, binds them

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irrevocably. All twelve of them remember a training they attended two decades ago in Fatima, also in Camarines Sur, after which they went swimming to a nearby resort. The mothers begin chattering, relishing the memory of an obviously special moment.

“The nutrition project made us what we are,” one mother said. Another said her involvement in the Applied Nutrition Centre cured her of her shyness and gave her a sense of belonging. Indeed, the women are assertive and bold – secure in themselves, in their families, and in their position as active participants in community development. They launch into a song, a local version of “Bahay Kubo,” that the mothers had composed to remind themselves of the ABCs of good nutrition:

*Petchay at malungay, camote at papaya  
Prutas, mga gulay, para sa ating mga mata  
Pag ating kinain, 'di tayo maduduling  
Mata natin kikislap, tulad ng bituin.*

Chinese cabbage and moringa leaves,  
sweet potato and papaya  
Fruits, vegetables, for our eyes  
If we eat them, we will not be cross-eyed  
Our eyes will shine, like stars.

“Bahay Kubo” is one of the Philippines’ most popular folk songs.

They also decry the proliferation of junk food that has set off still another form of malnutrition among today’s children. They criticize the design of the diversion road built ten years ago, for it is at a much higher level than their homes, a main cause of the



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The rabbit-raising project began by a member twenty years ago financed her children’s education and continues until now.

The Caceres Social Action Foundation staff of the Archdiocese of Caceres who helped locate the nutrition mothers.



frequent floods in Baaog come the rainy season. They complain about the general deterioration of their environment, and the failure of everyone in garbage disposal. They are women who will speak their minds and feelings.

“Another important lesson is that we can also criticize each other, say exactly what we think, and no one will take offence, because we know the criticism comes from a sincere concern for one another,” one said.

The mothers, in their words, “are more comfortable than before.” The project took place when they were in their difficult childbearing years. Money to put food on the table seemed always in short supply, and the mothers seemed perpetually harassed. But the children have finished school – many even have their own families now. The women now have more time, experience and spiritual insight as they carry on with their affairs, personal and social. They have not dropped the agenda of the community – the mothers remain leaders of different religious and civic organizations. They also come together once in a while. Some of the mothers went on a carolling jaunt this last Christmas, and with the donations solicited, they bought rice and foodstuffs that were given to the poorer neighbours. “A reverse kind of carolling because we didn’t keep our earnings for ourselves,” Tia Pining beamed. With the enduring ties that were built set in, too, the commitment to active community work that survives the passage of twenty years.

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