



A VILLAGE UNDER THREAT: BREAKING WITH PRECEDENT



The new footbridge improved the community's access to their farms, the school, and other development opportunities.

THE experience of Canada Fund for Local Initiatives with the people of Bab-Asig in 1986 and 1987 distills the program's mission: effective support to the people's effort toward sustainable and equitable development. In 1985, and again in 1986, the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, then still called Mission-Administered Fund (MAF), supported two separate projects of Bab-Asig, a small village in the hinterlands of the Cordillera. The first project was a water system to replace what was a fast-drying spring, which was the community's only main source of water within a decent distance. The second project was a footbridge to keep the people's access to their farms and schools, and neighbouring villages even during the rainy season. "The river swells in these areas, especially during the rainy season. So crossing the river is very dangerous, or sometimes arduous because you have to detour and take a much longer trail to get to your destination," said Manuel Ano of the Northern Philippines Tribal Development Center).

The support to the first project totalled less than Cdn\$15,000, and the second time around, only about Cdn\$5,000 – unquestionably small amounts,

compared with the other programs of the Canadian International Development Agency.

Indeed, the amounts were small, the water system and footbridge were of the simplest design and technology, yet the changes these brought about in the life of the community were profound. These changes were dramatic, not only in terms of the practical conveniences a steady water source and a footbridge offered, but more important, in demonstrating the strength of a collective that reclaims its agency – over drought, swelling rivers, even official neglect. The community, with its own welfare at stake, was not deterred by a lack of resources, perceived or real, that might have discouraged others from taking action. Rather, it knew it had the most important resource essential to development – the people.

The MAF year-end reports of 1986-1987 and 1987-1988 both contained short write-ups on the water system and footbridge projects in Bab-Asig. The collaboration apparently brought immense fulfillment to the Canadian Embassy, whose representative, Mr. Greg Strong, came to visit the area, Manuel recalls.

The following is a weaving of the separate write-ups into a short story of what happens when vision, unity and action meld.

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Bab-Asig is a very remote community in the mountainous interior of the northern province of Ilocos Sur. From here, the road to the municipal centre of Quirino is passable only during dry season. Quirino to Bab-Asig is a half-day's trek along arduous mountain trails.

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Bab-Asig is home to 415 members of the Aplai community, which is part of the larger Igorot indigenous group occupying the western parts of the Cordillera. The community's basis of livelihood is slash-and-burn agriculture – of a subsistence level. The government once built a one-room primary school, but no teacher could be found, so it stood empty. Insurgency and militarization were rampant. Typhoid raged through the area in recent years.

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A small local NGO, the Aplai Tribe Development Center, helped the people of Bab-Asig put together a technical survey for a gravity-fed water system to

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develop the distant spring. A proposal was packaged and submitted to the Mission-Administered Fund (MAF). Building on a strong tradition of self-reliance, the people formed their own waterworks association as co-proponent. The MAF Coordinator visited the community, discussed the technical design of the proposed water system, and listened to the community's plans. Watershed preservation had become a key concern. Upkeep and maintenance needs were anticipated. Environmental sanitation was considered. The project, valued at Cdn\$13,425.13, was approved.

The community's labour counterpart was enormous, and involved the entire community. The materials had to be hauled for miles up into the mountains before the actual project implementation could even begin. The quality of implementation of the project was first rate.

With a new water system came new optimism in this “forgotten” village. Life became easier, particularly for women, who could now do their daily chores without the backbreaking and time-consuming need to haul water. Fifteen families started backyard vegetable gardens. The future of the community was no longer in question. The people's sense of confidence was restored, and they began discussing new ideas and challenges.

Early the following year, the elders of Bab-Asig again approached MAF. The community needed a 70-meter footbridge because during the rainy season, the farmers could not reach their fields across Balasiyan River. The children could not reach their school in the next town. Bab-Asig was cut off from neighbouring villages.

The elders were told that although the MAF did not usually approve more than one project in the same

community, the request for assistance in building the footbridge could be considered if the people could formalize their organization so that this could stand as the direct project holder, and if they could mobilize the neighbouring communities to participate.

The community did just that, and MAF extended a modest support of Cdn\$5,022 directly to the Bab-Asig Water Association (BWA). MAF provided only the hardware. The people of Bab-Asig, joined by contingents from the neighbouring villages, again took to hauling the materials – gravel and sand – up into the mountains and down into the river valley. Then, in a matter of weeks, with a mid-project interval to allow the concrete stands of the anchor posts to set, the bridge was finished. It was again a first-rate job.

Undoubtedly, the project was a tremendous benefit – to the people's livelihood activities, to the children's improved access to their schools, and also in terms of simple convenience to the people. But just as important, it further strengthened the people's faith in their own ability to initiate and effect changes for the betterment of their community.

Moreover, all the unusual activity in and around Bab-Asig attracted the attention of the neighbours who journeyed to Bab-Asig to find out how all the changes became possible. The leaders of BWA also started visiting the neighbours to explain to them how the development of a community comes about if the people unite and work together.

Shortly after, the BWA members began discussing the ways of establishing their own collective rice mill, this time without external assistance.



With the new water system, a sense of confidence was restored.