



MICRO TARGETS IN MACRO SETTINGS: PEOPLE-LED WASTE MANAGEMENT



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THE resort city of Baguio nestled in the mountains of Benguet is a favourite tourist destination (local and international) in the Philippines. It is also an artist's haven, known for breathtaking panoramas of the Cordilleras; serene, pristine gardens; quaint pubs; as well as an indigenous culture associated with export-quality woodcarving tradition. Few people, however, know of Irisan, the largest barangay of Baguio in terms of land area, population and poverty incidence.

Irisan is the dumpsite of Baguio, and is locally called the city's Smoky Mountain. Indeed, although dumping in Irisan began less than 10 years ago, with the regular daytime population of nearly 400,000, which triples during Holy Week and Christmas vacations, the garbage that has accumulated in Irisan has formed a mountainous heap of methane-emitting garbage in the area. The entire city's trash 60% of which is spoiled vegetables is deposited here by open trucks.*

The dumpsite has provided home and livelihood to about 110 scavenger families who consider solid waste as a resource to be recovered. Based on a survey of the area conducted last year, 73% of the community's

* except for a multinational that maintains its own sanitized landfill

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Women wastepickers: hopeful in the promise of composting

population earn an average of P1,500 to P4,000 per month, depending on the volume and quality of recyclables they are able to retrieve. Women and children pitch in for additional income, and as a result, the children are deprived of basic education, health care and play.

Participatory Approach

The Jaime V. Ongpin Foundation Inc. (JVOFI), with its thrust on environment conservation, being the former outreach arm of a large mining company and the initiator of several major watershed management projects in Benguet province, realized the need for an environmentally sound solid waste management for Baguio. The foundation was also conscious that a participatory approach is essential to any such waste management program, but that before people’s participation can be enroled into any project, they must first be convinced of its logic. In 1999, in partnership with a supportive local government unit (LGU), the group initiated a series of consultations with the various stakeholders – the Irisan dumpsite residents, various market organizations, representatives from the business sector and government and non-government agencies – that eventually resulted in a strategic action plan anchored on a need to improve environmental sustainability and promote poverty alleviation.

As a result, the vendors and buyers of the public market, the source of the bulk of Baguio’s waste, were persuaded to adopt waste segregation. With donations from the business community, JVOFI and the LGU launched a “Linis Palengke” (Clean Market) campaign. Separate bins were provided in strategic spots for red (non-biodegradable), and brown and green (biodegradable) trash.

Old habits die hard, and in the beginning, the vendors resisted the idea of waste segregation. “I was very diligent in visiting the market and reminding the vendors,” says Rhoda Buenavista, JVOFI’s officer for its solid waste management project. “Whenever I’d hear comments that the market was dirty, I was back there with the vendors.”

Signs written in the vernacular that reminded people to segregate waste were posted in strategic spots in the market. These were donated by the business community.

Viable Alternative

The impact of a solid waste management program

Ambassador Robert Collette and then Baguio City administrator Virgilio Bautista examine the gift items made from recyclables by SINAG.



would be more pronounced at the Irisan dumpsite, and the foundation saw the possibilities of composting as a livelihood for Irisan Village. The wastepickers' concerns were eased by education and information not only on the environmental but also the economic benefits that could be derived from composting.

Two years since the foundation began organizing and conducting capability-building sessions in the Irisan community, the area is now ready with a composting plant and the cooperative that will manage this. The LGU provided the infrastructure and engineering component of the plant. It has also committed support to trainings and various capability-building activities. Through efforts of the foundation and the city government's General Services Office, a grant was acquired from the President's Social Fund for further development of the facility.

The JVOFI is in charge of the social component of the program, such as community organizing, capability building and implementation of livelihood and microfinance projects. It was also able to acquire financial support from donor agencies including Canada Fund, Japan Embassy-Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects, DISOP-Belgium, and the Foundation for Philippine Environment. Another NGO based in Manila, the Foundation for a Sustainable Society Inc. (FSSI), which has extensive expertise in solid waste management, provides technical support to the project.

This plant has attracted such attention that even though it is set to operate by the end of 2002 only, many LGUs are already awaiting the start-up of operations so they can conduct a study-tour of the plant, waste management being a major LGU concern in Philippines with the closure of many existing landfills.



Novelty items from plastic, paper and other recyclables from the women of Irisan

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Preparing the Ground

Even before the plan of composting as an alternative livelihood for Irisan was hatched, through a microfinance support from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives to livelihood projects of the women wastepickers of Irisan as early as 1996, JVOFI was already planting the seeds of the notion that there are options to scavenging. With this grant, the group was able to extend loans of as much as P2,400 to capitalize the different activities of the women for supplemental income, mainly the production of crafts and gift items from recyclables - the assortment of materials they were able to retrieve from the dumpsite. JVOFI, which subscribes to the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) strategy, a variant of Grameen banking, noted the 100% repayment record of the Irisan women.

A second grant from Canada Fund in 2001, together with support from other donor groups, allowed JVOFI to carry out teambuilding, training and organizing among the women until they were organized into Sari-Saring Itinapon na Gintong Yaman (SINAG), or “wealth in trash.” SINAG is subsumed under the Irisan Community Environmental Multipurpose Cooperative that will manage the digestive/composting plant.

The women of Irisan were gathered for several sessions with a product development consultant sponsored by Canada Fund to improve the designs and quality of their candles, candleholders, bags, Christmas decor and other items made from recycled materials. Participation in trade fairs allowed some of the women to earn P12,000 from the sale of their candles.

The two Canada Fund grants totalling P670,000, together with a P400,000 counterpart from the foundation itself, have capitalized the recycling ventures of about 100 women, which in turn have increased incomes by P1,500 to P2,500 per household after six months. SINAG’s products are permanently showcased in a nook of Baguio City Hall.

Vision Remodified

In the beginning, JVOFI wanted the families of Irisan out of scavenging, and wanted scavenging banned altogether. “Who would want to live in a dumpsite? It’s such a hazardous place to be called home,” says Rhoda. Last year, she recalls, a child was fatally dragged by a payloador working in the dumpsite.

However, for the women of Irisan, until the special three-phase power line needed to run the composting plant is installed and this is operational, until they see with their own eyes the promised advantages of



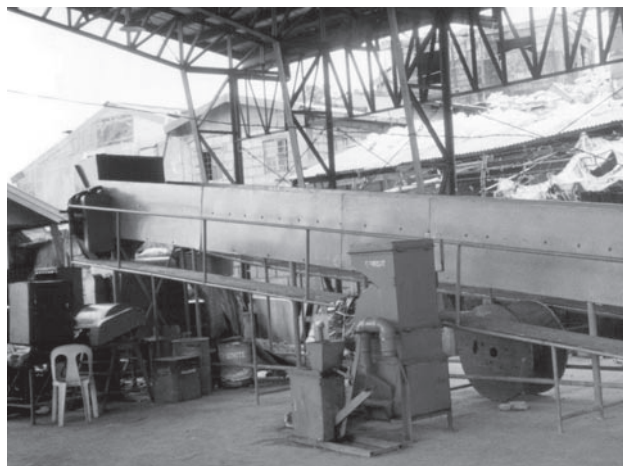
Any waste management program has to consider all the stakeholders.

composting, scavenging is their means of survival. “On a good day, we earn as much as P100; on a bad one, maybe P30,” says Aurea, a mother of five. The women literally comb the dumpsite with improvised hayforks for recyclables - plastic (bags, cups, bottles), tin (pop-soda and other cans) and paper that they painstakingly sort and clean and then sell to junk shops. The SINAG women call these “minas,” from the word “mine.” There are also the “entries” – tin-foil wraps and other containers of powder coffee, milk, soap, toothpaste - the packaging of any and all products whose manufacturers may have a promotional gimmick, say, a contest where the top prize is cash or a home appliance.

Rhoda shows the conveyor belt of the composting plant, which stretches to at least 20 meters. There is a slightly raised platform beside the conveyor belt on which the collected trash will be unloaded and carried to the digester at the belt’s end. The community’s cooperative, with JVOFI’s assistance, has prepared a schedule that will accommodate the scavengers who will line up along the belt so they can pick the recyclables they want.

“We may have another vision for these women, but this dumpsite is their life, and yanking them away from it without a viable alternative would be unfair,” Rhoda muses. “JVOFI now realizes that. For the meantime, what we want to be able to do is to make scavenging safer for them.”

This time, the attempt to draw up a comprehensive waste management program indeed considered all the stakeholders, especially the wastepickers, they who are oftentimes pushed to the background. Such inclusiveness will be key to the program’s success.



The conveyor belt of the composting plant