



FROM CURRENCY TO CONSCIOUSNESS: A PITCH FOR COASTAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



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EVEN in the small town of Lobo, at the southernmost tip of Batangas, where fishing is the main livelihood, the differences between the rich and poor are pronounced. The top tier is occupied by a clutch of families that own large vessels that can go out deep into the waters. These vessels have a crew of anywhere from five to a dozen. The middle tier consists of those with small motorized bancas handled by two to three men. At the bottom of the pyramid are the marginal fishers using only the simplest of methods – paddled bancas and a hook and line.

Because the catch over the past years has been steadily dwindling, most of the marginal fishers have been forced instead to work as “labourers” of Lobo’s large vessels. The traditional arrangement between the owners and the workers, however, is a lopsided one. Consider this: The earnings from the daily catch are divided evenly, 50% to the vessel owner, and the other 50% among the crew. But the reckoning of “crew” in Lobo means the total number of workers plus one more – to represent the banca itself!



The workers end up with barely enough to feed a family of six to eight, the average family size in Lobo. They would then have to borrow money from the vessel owner against their future earnings. Usually, the loan would not even be in currency, but in the form of rice, soap, sugar and other basic supplies. Tough labour for meagre returns.



A Fixed Goal

A desire to disentangle the poor families of Lobo fishers from indebtedness and improve their crude hook-and-line fishing method prompted the Lobo Community Development Center (LCDC) to develop a poverty alleviation project called “Banca Para Sa Mangingisda” that the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives supported in year 2000.

According to Dario Untalan, executive director of LCDC, besides fishing, there are few other options available in Lobo. The town engages in limited copra making and the trading in atis (sugarapples) and bananas grown in the surrounding foothills. Only four of Lobo’s 26 barangays are able to engage in rice farming. There are no factories or any other source of private employment, except for one high school. A recent survey of the health department’s local worker found the majority of Lobo’s children suffering from mild to moderate malnutrition.

Under “Banca Para Sa Mangingisda,” ten families each from three barangays, Olo-olo, Sawang and Masaguitsit, would be able to jointly own a motorized banca, and better equipment and nets through a combination grant-loan package.

LCDC estimated the banca itself would cost P25,000; the main engine, another P25,000; a second motor for



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the banca lights, another P25,000; and the rest for the nets and operational capital. One-half of the P100,000 allocated for each of the three groups would be a grant, and the other half, a loan payable within a year in quarterly instalments, at 1% interest.

The three clusters were organized into a federation, the Samahan ng Maliit na Mangingisda ng Lobo (SAMMAL). Members include women who, although not into actual fishing, participated in mending the fish nets, and led the fish-drying and marketing components. To ensure project sustainability, LCDC also imposed a savings fund, representing 10% of gross sales for every fishing operation, as a reserve for seasons when the catch would be lean.

Both the Olo-olo and Masaguitsit chapters sought and obtained permission from LCDC and Canada Fund to deviate somewhat from the original plan. Instead of brand new bancas, they bought second-hand ones, and used the “savings” to build fishponds since their villages had the appropriate space for these. The fishponds would put them in a better position to pay back their loan right away, the two chapters reasoned.

The SAMMAL members of Olo-olo and Masaguitsit dug out the ground in preparation for the fishponds, which were subsequently stocked with 30,000 bangus fry as well as tiger prawn. They awaited the time they could harvest, in the meantime tending to the fishponds and going out into the waters to fish by turns.

In October 2000, three months before they could harvest the fishponds, however, typhoon Reming struck. Water came crashing down the surrounding denuded hills, flooding the entire Lobo, and washing out the fishponds. The consequences of Reming were crippling, and the Olo-olo and Masaguitsit chapters asked for an extension of their repayment period.

Dario estimates that the bancas, for almost a year, improved the income of the 30 families by as much as P500 monthly. Despite the access to deeper waters due to improved fishing gear, however, the SAMMAL members were experiencing ever-declining catch because of overfishing, a problem, it should be noted, not unique to Batangas Bay.

Hazardous fishing practices such as dynamite fishing and cyanide fishing are still found in other parts of the Philippines. In Lobo and the other coastal towns of Batangas, thanks to an active Batangas Bay Integrated Fisheries and Aquatic Management Council, these illegal methods have been curbed. But the problem is the destroyed coral reefs.



A pond teeming with bangus and shrimp would have helped the two villages pay back the bancas.

Unexpected Boon

At the time of the implementation of “Banca Para Sa Mangingisda,” the local governments in the area were poised to repair the situation by installing artificial coral reefs made from rubber tires. The plan was stalled by an unexpected ban from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, which at the time was looking into allegations that the artificial reefs were contributing to the “littering” of the seas. “The issue was not whether the reefs were effective. They were. But it seems these reefs would sometimes tear apart and would come up to the water surface,” Dario said.

The Batangas Bay Integrated Fisheries and Aquatic Management Council has been actively seeking alternatives to protect and revive the coastal ecosystem. The Council is composed of representatives of NGOs and the local agrarian and fisheries offices of the towns of San Juan, Bauan and Mabini, as well as Batangas City including Isla Verde. It is also a member of the International Marine Alliance. The Council’s comprehensive conservation program in terms of policing Batangas Bay includes regular boat patrols and cleanup operations where the most active participants are the SAMMAL members.

This is because integral to the “Banca Para Sa Mangingisda” project were training and education activities, including inputs on coastal resource management. From these, the SAMMAL members

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developed an understanding of the reasons behind the festering problem of declining catch they had been experiencing for years. It should be noted that SAMMAL's president is the vice chair of the Batangas Bay Integrated Fisheries and Aquatic Management Council. "This is significant because his leadership reinforces the organization's commitment to coastal resource management," Dario said.

LCDC also conducted sessions on values formation, teambuilding, gender sensitivity, grassroots accounting and organizational development, exercises that would empower SAMMAL with a wider perspective of their situation. It was no surprise then that when Lobo's local government unit (LGU) suggested the designation of Sawang as fish sanctuary, this was met by much resistance from much of Lobo, except for the villagers in Sawang itself, as well as the two other SAMMAL areas of Olo-olo and Masaguitsit.

"In a way, the others' strong opposition to the idea of a fish sanctuary is understandable. They feel even more threatened because the limited fishing area accessible to them will become even smaller once a portion is declared a fish sanctuary. They want to see that alternatives are in place," Dario said. The three SAMMAL-influenced barangays, on the other hand, are also the most receptive to the LGU's attempt to introduce eco-tourism in the area. SAMMAL members were visible at the three public hearings the LGU held.

The consciousness-raising component of a project designed to improve the beneficiaries' efficiency and productivity in fishing had primed them for the broader, long-term agenda of sustainable resource management.