



CRAFTSMANSHIP WITH MARKETING SAVVY: THE WARP AND WEFT OF LOCAL ENTERPRISE



Rhoda Pon-An, executive
director of Antique
Development Foundation

The Antique Development Foundation (ADF) became a major actor in charting the course of development of Antique province as soon as it was established in 1986, after the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos. An active organizer of the farmers and fisherfolks, the group ran several successful development projects, including a micro-finance program and potable-water systems in the remote barangays. It served as the “unity coalition” of the province, bringing the church, business and local government executives from rival political parties together to address the issues of Antique’s poor and marginalized. However, resource generation for the group’s stability was confined to the chair, and with her resignation, ADF had to grapple with a dilemma – certainty in its potential to contribute to Antique’s development yet unable to do so for lack of resources. “While we were organizing and training left and right,” said ADF executive director Rhoda Pon-An,

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“we failed to transform these skills and seminars to real economic value.”

Stock-Taking

ADF had the experience, the expertise and the network. These were resources that could be parlayed into real assets toward Antique’s development. “We made an inventory of our strengths and weaknesses, and saw that our strength was precisely in the community organizations that we had organized. In addition to our commitment to ADF’s vision,” Rhoda said.

One resource that could be harnessed was the group of women mat-weavers that the foundation had trained before, as mat weaving is a tradition and local handicraft. A grant for micro-enterprise development in 1998 gave ADF the chance to build on an earlier experience of the group in enterprise development under a bilateral program of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Canadian International Development Agency. “The difference was for that project, we were just an implementer, and were bound by the trade department’s framework of training for enterprise development,” Rhoda said. “But with the new project, we had the space to develop the design and decide the ‘boundaries,’ including the specific activities to carry out.”

The group realized product development and marketing were key to a successful enterprise in the province’s local handicrafts. With the support from Canada Fund, ADF gained the chance to focus on these two aspects. “In the past, the communities were making only bags and ordinary sleeping mats,” Rhoda said. But the grant from Canada Fund allowed them to explore other products. Today, ADF exports a diverse range of houseware and décor – coasters, trays, decorative boxes, ovenware holders, lampshades – made of *barixw* palm and abaca. The weavers were also able to improve the ordinary mats they used to make into novelty floor accents.

As well, ADF was able to explore the use of other materials. Its designers are now experimenting with the use of leather, shells, beads and coir on the bags and belts.

Hard-Nosed Business Outlook

But the biggest boon from Canada Fund’s support was ADF’s market encounters, Rhoda announces with flourish. Earlier attempts by the local government to promote handicrafts were basically static. “The products were on display in the capitol in case



ADF’s houseware line includes abaca wine holders.

A clear delineation of responsibilities between ADF and the producers allows the venture to keep abreast with the export market's preference in designs and colors.



somebody was interested and would place an order, but no aggressive marketing was done,” Rhoda said. In addition, unless there was an order and a deposit payment had been made, the weavers did not have the capital to sustain production. The support from Canada Fund also gave ADF its first crack at participating in a national trade fair, the Market Week.

Being a newcomer, however, the group did not anticipate the logistics involved. The weavers were hard put to meet the deadlines, while Rhoda and her companions had to become instant carpenters and booth designers. “People think being in the trade fair is a glamorous deal. It is not! We were on all fours because we had to prepare and decorate the booth, while our neighbours had carpenters and professionals to do the job. We kept hammering until our arms ached,” Rhoda said.

Behind the pizzazz of a trade show are bottles and bottles of muscle liniments.

Yet participation in trade shows is a necessary investment, Rhoda notes. “Others think of it as an expense, but it really is an investment. You know, the buyers who came last year will be the same ones who will visit next year. And they will look for you. If you’re not there, they begin to question your sustainability and track record.”

But the most important lesson in Enterprise Development is the necessary division of labour. “There has to be a recognition of expertise. The communities cannot do the marketing, they do not have the skills for this. Their expertise is production,” said Rhoda. Some may view this as condescending! But Rhoda points out, “They [the weavers] will be pulverized by the buyers. They will be forced into agreeing to very low prices that will not yield any returns after all.”

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The Market's Pulse

Moreover, the weavers, being in the remote mountain villages, have no sense of the market – the current trends in designs and colours, even packaging. In negotiating deadlines, they have yet to learn to factor in the time needed for packing and freight. Product quality, moreover, has to be enforced at all times, regardless of whether one is rushing an order.

Such an ethnic usually found in pure businesses is proving successful. ADF is filling orders from Belgium and Japan, and there are numerous invitations to trade shows overseas. “We’re very much tempted, but the costs will be astounding,” Rhoda said.

From 15 weavers, more than 60 families are now involved in the production. The women are the main weavers, but the children also help out while the men are the ones who prepare the materials. In addition, other communities have also been mobilized to ensure the steady supply of *bariw* and abaca, and to perform the other processes such as dyeing. “Weaving here is not just the women weaving with two bare hands, it has become a family enterprise,” Rhoda said.

In addition, Antique’s dream of a permanent showcase for its local handicrafts is fulfilled in a new building made possible by a grant from Japan. The ADF office is a must-visit for any visitor of Antique, local or foreign. The local government executives bring important callers to this showroom of the province’s arts and crafts, which also houses ADF’s marketing operations. People from different communities come regularly, for deliveries and orders, and basically just to stay connected, for the enterprise has become a hub for all – the buyers, weavers, the farmers supplying the raw materials, and the tourists. The ADF showroom is a testimony of the advantages possible when an area’s production expertise is injected with business common sense.

Handicrafts producers assisted by Antique Development Foundation with Canada Fund staff Lynette Corcino (second from right)



Canada Fund