



SBMC

WOMEN'S WAYS AND MEANS: SISTERHOOD OVERCOMES TRAGEDY



Cookies that melt
in the mouth

DURING Christmas, a variant of “trick or treat” continues to be observed in several provinces of the Philippines, despite its disappearance in Manila and other urban centres. In the Southern Tagalog region, children most look forward to their door-to-door visit of neighbouring homes. Here, coins enough to buy a piece of candy or two are distributed to each child. The children are welcome usually until midday. In Central Luzon, some towns substitute coins with candies, tarts and other sweets. In barangay Sepung Bulaon in Porac, Pampanga, the mothers give away cookies made from arrowroot, a tuber that resembles ginger on the outside, and has the consistency of taro on the inside. When made according to the original recipe of Sepung Bulaon’s grandmothers, arrowroot cookies practically melt in one’s mouth.

The arrowroot cookies became the women’s “flagship” project when the training arm of Department of Agriculture organized them into the local Rural Improvement Club in 1989.

Double Whammy, Multiple Burden

Three years after, the women went through two life-



The women have developed a kinship that goes beyond social concerns, into personal exchange.

changing events – the explosion of Mt. Pinatubo in June 1991, which the *Britannica* considers the worst volcanic eruption of the 20th century; and the forced pullout of the American military facility in neighbouring Angeles City days before the explosion.

“A lot of us depended on Clark Air Base for our main livelihood. Our husbands worked there as maintenance or technical staff, or even cab drivers within the base,” recalls SBMC Chair Leonor Nagrampa.

The men subsequently lost their jobs, and most of them became dependant. Some even turned to alcohol. It was up to the women to find ways of restoring their homes badly destroyed by the tremendous ashfall from the eruption, which included truck-size boulders spewed out within a 30-kilometer radius of the volcano. It was also up to the women to put food on the tables and continue sending the children to school.

The SBMC women were fuelled by the resolve to feed their families and repair the community. In between baking arrowroot cookies as a group, the coop members also had their individual ventures – breads and other cookies, chutneys, packaged nuts and other foodstuffs. The revolving fund also capitalized some of the women’s pig-raising and other income-generation endeavours. To a large extent, barangay Sepung Bulaon rose “from the ashes” due to these enterprising women, and their Rural Improvement Club was judged the region’s best by the agriculture department. In 1993, this Rural Improvement Club became a full-fledged registered cooperative called the Sepung Bulaon Multipurpose Cooperative (SBMC).

SBMC would eventually inspire the formation of another cooperative involving the men of Porac engaged in meatprocessing. It is now even able to support a day care centre by shouldering the teacher’s salary.

A Beam from the Airwaves

One morning in 1994, Leonor, tuned in to a radio program, heard the Canadian ambassador explain the embassy’s small-grants program called Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. That very day, SBMC had a meeting and the members decided there and then they would apply for such a grant so they could expand their arrowroot production and build their own store. Until then, the women were operating out of a member’s house.

Leonor and a few of the coop officers went straight to the Canadian embassy to inquire into the application process. A few months and a proposal appraisal later, the group’s request for enterprise-development support was approved. The grant was for the construction of a

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It was up to the women to overcome the destruction wrought by the tremendous Pinatubo eruption of 1991.



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bakery-cum-store that would serve as a permanent outlet for the coop's products and its office. Arguments over how the Canada Fund support should be used, however, ensued, with some members insisting that the money be divided up equally among the individual members to serve as capital for their individual income-generating ventures. The others were adamant. The grant should be used as planned – for the group's store and production expansion. Canada Fund had to step in directly to mediate the conflict.

The coop was able to purchase a piece of land a few meters from the entrance to the barangay, and on this built its bakery/store. The women regularly came to bake their arrowroot cookies, which brought them an additional P500 income monthly.

In 2000, someone broached the idea of applying for another grant with Canada Fund. The others hesitated, embarrassed by the feud that the first Canada Fund support had triggered. But the women's enterprising side prevailed, and a second grant approved in 2001 made SBMC the first group to receive Canada Fund support to enlist the technical assistance of a business development service (BDS) provider for enhanced project sustainability. This BDS consultant provided training in bookkeeping, basic management and leadership skills. After one year of assistance, the systems and mechanisms for the viability of the coop as a microenterprise were in place.

The second grant also facilitated the purchase of a second oven. When the women are not baking their arrowroot cookies, they lease out the oven, especially during Christmas, at P25 per cookie tray.

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A Canada Fund grant allowed the coop to build its bakery-cum-grocery.

Group Dynamics, Personal Growth

The ties developed over the years between the SBMC members have galvanized in them a sense of

Determination to succeed
has won for Sepung
Bulaon Multipurpose
Cooperative several
awards.



Arguments over
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ensued, with
some members
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money be divided
up equally among
the individual
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solidarity for each other and their neighbours, Leonor, and the coop board directors – Elvira, Marietta, Geronima and Flor – revealed. “Of course, in the beginning, our husbands minded the time we would spend on the coop’s meetings,” Marietta admits. In the past years, however, the spouses grumble no more. When the coop has overnight study tours or joins a trade fair in Manila, which will require an overnight stay with relatives of a certain member, there are no questions asked, and the men gladly take on the household chores. The spouses have become the most enthusiastic supporters. “Also because they realize how the coop has helped them personally when they were in need,” said Geronima.

The women enjoy themselves the most, they say, when they are baking as a group. Here they exchange one another’s stories – of their joys, as with a child’s college graduation or impending grandchild. Leonor and the other officers are cheering on the recently widowed coop treasurer, Geronima, as she prepares to join her family abroad.

The stories shared are also stories of their pains. They know of each other’s financial difficulties, for example, and the coop officers are bent on improving the lives of the poorer members, including Mary who, because of hard times and an unemployed spouse, had to do the laundry for some neighbours. With the coop’s support, Mary was able to start a buy-and-sale venture in garments and kitchen utensils. Another member, Lolita, now manages her own nursery that supplies seedlings of fruit-bearing trees and ornamentals, also as a result of the coop’s assistance.

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The strong collective spirit is also found in the search for solutions to assorted problems – for example, with the group’s arrowroot cookies, or the members’ financial concerns in general.

Even as the women want to increase their production to further enhance their incomes, for example, they have to contend with the stiff competition of other suppliers. Distribution is also a problem because some large stores in Pampanga province that serve as outlets have taken to replacing the coop’s labels with their in-house brands. “But we really want to banner the arrowroot cookies of Sepung Bulaon,” says Leonor.

“Maybe it’s all right if they remove the labels as long as they guarantee to absorb a fixed volume of our cookies,” offers Elvira.

The coop has a tie-up with the San Juan Multipurpose Cooperative (also a Canada Fund beneficiary) composed of meatprocessors in the neighbouring town of Lubao: they carry each other’s products in their stores.

Sepung Bulaon is comparatively difficult to reach, and the coop also envisions a service vehicle it could use for its long-distance deliveries and purchases.

The best illustration of the women’s determination to make SBMC take off is when they got an audience with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who is also from Pampanga province. When the President asked how the government might be able to help the coop, the women said, “If you could please, Madam President, use our arrowroot cookies as the Palace’s giveaways during Christmas.” Trust the women to spot the opportunity for the highest possible endorsement of their cookies – without spending megabucks on advertising.



Launching of a daycare centre assisted by the coop