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WHEN PUBLIC PLUS PRIVATE WORKS: HANDICRAFT ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

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At one o'clock in the morning, Arlyn dela Torre would still be in the off-road vehicle lent by the provincial governor, crossing from one village to another in the foothills of Prosperidad, Agusan del Sur. She was picking up the placemats for delivery to America. The houses would still be bright and bustling. Inside, father, mother and the older children were wide-awake, quietly finishing their placemat quotas.

Back in the office in a few hours after, Arlyn would sort the mats, discarding the imperfect ones. Her target was to load the placemats she collected on the only flight from Butuan City to Manila that day.

For about two weeks in April 2003, this was Arlyn's early-morning routine. The pressure to meet the shipment deadline was intense. One night, Arlyn could not help herself and confronted her mother, Angelita, for her failure to meet her own quota. The exchange between mother and daughter heated. Soon they were shouting at each other.

Angelita's duty as president of Prosperidad Weavers Association was to ensure that the weavers were on

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target with their quotas. This meant dealing with numerous details, and having no time left for her own weaving assignment.

Arlyn's father was upset to see his wife and daughter fighting. Raising his voice above the din, he told off both. "Don't bring your fight here in the house. Settle your issues in your office."

There was temporary peace. The next morning, during the association meeting, mother and daughter got into a vigorous argument again. Both were shouting and crying at the same time. Later in the afternoon, however, they reconciled.

"But that was a happy problem," Angelita said, laughing now as they recall the incident. Angelita was referring to the tension whenever the mothers of the association are filling a large order.

Before the women ventured into weaving, however, there was only the grinding dearth of poverty. There was no livelihood and no food. The children could not go to school for lack of the basics — uniform, footwear, paper, recess snacks. Although the association members belong to agrarian reform communities, the costs of inputs were too high for their spouses to engage in any kind of farming. During the rainy season from March to May, the villagers scoured the hills and mountains for wild *kamote* (wild sweet potato). During the rest of the year, they lived on rice and *guinamos* (fermented baby fish or shrimp). One woman even died from poisoning because the wild *kamote* was not prepared properly.

Today, weaving is the main source of livelihood to more than 100 families in eight barangays in Prosperidad. Arlyn and Angelita, as well as Candida "Idang" Tangaro, the association's production manager; Rosie Narciso, one of the barangay coordinators; and the other women in 75 of these families are full-time weavers for the association, earning PhP700 (Cdn\$17.50) to as much as PhP1,000 (Cdn\$25) a week. The others are part-time weavers (less skilled and no formal training) assigned to the edging of the various items woven from "romblon grass" by the others.

The romblon grass used refers to *pandanus utilis*, actually a tropical tree that can grow to as high as 60 feet.

Steered by a vision

But the transition from such extreme poverty was not easy, Irene Lavilla and Reynaldo "Toto" Paciente caution. It required the hard work and patience of the local government, which was under orders from Governor Adolph Edward Plaza to look for the comparative advantage of each municipality in Agusan del Sur — the

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The association members
check out their romblon
plantation.



economic potential that could be tapped to improve the livelihood conditions of the people.

Irene is with the provincial office of the Department of Trade and Industry; Toto is the technical staff of the Department of Agrarian Reform in the province. Together with representatives from the Provincial Employment Service Office, the Department of Labour and Employment, and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (the agency assigned as overseer of technical and vocational education in the country), they formed the technical working group that alternately cajoled and wooed the women of Prosperidad into believing change was possible.

In the beginning, only one old woman knew how to weave mats in Prosperidad. This was Nanay (Mother) Sosing, who even planted around a hectare covering several hills to romblon. But her sleeping mats were ordinary and business, not surprisingly, was slow. Toto nevertheless saw the potential of romblon. The group brainstormed and proceeded to plan the development of romblon-based handicrafts for Prosperidad. It completed a resource-mapping effort to assess the supply of romblon. The group negotiated the lease of the romblon plantation of Nanay Sosing, who at first was threatened by the idea of rival weavers. But the attraction of an immediate return on her plantation was difficult to resist, and she agreed.

The mothers were equally hard to convince. For generations, life was uniformly hard, and it was impossible to imagine this would change. Toto and Irene encouraged the women to weave, even though there was no buyer. "Just for the inventory," Irene said. She and Toto would haul whatever could be bought from the women to the provincial capitol and dump it there. "We'd display the items in the office, but the quality was really quite poor."

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Irene and Toto must have spent at least PhP10,000 (Cdn\$250) of their personal money over the years of assembling Prosperidad’s romblon handicrafts industry, “just so that the mothers did not give up.”

A partnership forged

The technical working group faced two solid problems. First, the women had to be introduced to a higher level of weaving. Second, their products had to be set apart from the competition. The group consulted experts in weaving and decided Prosperidad should specialise in the eyelet-style weaving that features intricate solid and open spaces in the pattern, similar to the *callado* style Philippine hand embroidery is noted for. Although more difficult and time-consuming, the eyelet style is rare, and could be the women’s edge over the weavers in the Visayas.

The mothers also had to be trained in materials preparation and dyeing. They were ready.

Because weaving now distracted the women from their household chores, whenever Toto and Irene visited, the men would say, “The nuisances are here again.” But when the orders came trickling in and the women began earning, the men were convinced and enrolled into the weaving project. The gender divide had been crossed. “Weaving became a family endeavour,” Idang said.

Some of the best weavers are the men. “Some of them are quicker than us,” Rosie said.

The children are also expert weavers. They help their parents full-time during summer vacation, and once they are done with their homework during the school year. One child was able to save enough from his share of the weaving income to buy a bicycle that he now uses to school.

Along the way, however, the project stumbled upon several weaknesses — times when Irene or Toto felt like tossing the cause. But one’s confidence counteracted the other’s wavering. “Irene was the aggressive one, challenging us, questioning our capabilities,” the women said. “Toto was the milder one. He would explain to us the issue as Irene began walking out.”

As for the association members — both women and men — they were buoyed by their initial taste of the possibilities. Together, the technical working group and the association addressed the problems step by step, mainly through a strategy of centralisation of the romblon production, materials preparation and dyeing processes. Decision-making had become collective. Everyone now had a claim on the success, or failure, of the project.

Arlyn, her mother Angelita, Rosie, and Idang, four of the pioneers and movers of Prosperidad Weavers Association



Ironing the kinks

The first serious setback was the type of romblon grass used — the smooth variety, which proved less durable. Irene, Toto and the rest of the technical working group returned to the drawing board and after much research, recommended the use of the pandanus variety with thorns.

Also, the families' time was divided between weaving, preparing the materials and tending to their romblon. Each family had to harvest the grass and whittle the rattan used for backing on its own. The rattan used was brittle, moreover, and difficult to handle, besides being difficult to prepare.

The project arranged for the purchase of seedlings of the right type of romblon and replaced the stock on existing plantations. Later, one barangay council member volunteered a hectare of a sloping area in his care, under a stewardship arrangement. He donated his labour in raising the romblon grass as well.

Before, dyeing was also performed per household, the colours were uneven. Idang was sent to Davao City for training, and she has since passed on the skills she acquired to the couple now in charge of dyeing. The concentration of this process in just one family, Irene noted, ensures uniform colours of the association's products.

Little by little, the project strengthened its foothold. It sometimes would lose footing, but never got off track.

Marketing savvy

By 2002, one big mall in Davao City and another in Manila were distributing the association's bags, placemats, wine holders and lampshades. The time of Irene and Toto's "sympathy buying" was over.

A few months after, the association turned to Canada

The gender divide had been crossed. Weaving became a family endeavour.



The bags, baskets and wine holders featuring the association's *callado*-style weaving



garden

Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) for support to maximise the benefits of the weaving project. Specifically, the CFLI grant helped establish an office that would oversee the weavers and handle inquiries and deliveries, as well as the bookkeeping task (the job that went to Arlyn). It also expanded production and marketing. A component of the CFLI support went to the association's participation in the trade fairs in Davao City and Manila.

While these were exciting firsts, “now we choose which trade fair to join,” the women said blithely. “Sometimes, the orders are too big for their capacity,” Toto added. A buyer from Japan, for example, is considering importing 50,000 bags from the women, but based on projections, maximum monthly capacity is 8,000 bags. One bag takes two to four days to finish, depending on the weaver's skill.

“When we plan our production schedule, we also have to take into account the fiestas, the weddings, the baptisms — all these occasions that will divert the association's attention,” Irene said.

Before, the provincial government lent its off-road truck; today, the association pays rent for its use. “We even paid for its repair when it broke down while we were using it,” Arlyn said proudly. “We spent PhP1,500 (Cdn\$37.50).” The rental goes to the provincial government's revenues.

These days, anybody who approaches Governor Plaza for a donation or some other form of assistance is referred to the association for a job. “Here, go to Prosperidad Weavers Association and you will find a job that will allow you to earn your family's keep,” he would say.

The governor is also the association's most industrious marketing guy, promoting its items to his network of friends and contacts, at home and whenever he is in Manila. The most recent order was from his exporter friend in Manila.

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The local government also plans to assign space for the association's office in the display hall of the provincial government centre that doubles as the province's main tourist shop.

Tangible change

Mobile peddlers selling house ware — plastic basins, steel pots and pans, an assortment of kitchen utensils, home linens and décor — are a common sight in Mindanao. On motorcycles, they climb up and down the barangays with their merchandise, selling these on instalment basis. But they seldom visited the communities of Rosie, Idang, or Arlyn and her mother. These were just too poor and not worth the effort.

But the twinning of the local government's persistence and the mothers' industry has paid off. "That was before Prosperidad Weavers Association," Idang said. "Now, they come every Friday because they know Friday is the day when the association distributes the members' earnings for the week. They know we have money to pay them."

Other members have been able to improve their homes, replacing their nipa roofs with corrugated iron sheets, for example. "One family was able to buy a TV set; another, a wall divider," Angelita said. Others use the earnings from weaving to resume farming, thereby multiplying the family income.

Change has indeed come to Prosperidad, through the joint efforts of the local government and the people. And Irene and Toto's technical working group is now trying to replicate this in the municipalities of Talacogon and San Fernando. Talacogon is abundant in nito and rattan, and these two materials will be their specialty, while San Francisco will concentrate on agsam grass, which abounds in the area. The prospects of success are bright as long as the new groups' efforts are matched by the same determination the women of Prosperidad mustered.