



NIMBLE HANDS, COLOURFUL GRASSES: WEAVING INTO SELF-RELIANCE



Lita Evangelista, human
resources development
officer

TAHANANG Walang Hagdanan (House With No Steps) is not spared from the economic malaise that has visited upon the Philippines, and Asia in general, since the freefall of the region's currencies in the late nineties. Add to this the global economic slump – which translates into significantly reduced orders from the organization's traditional markets for its various products – wheelchairs, educational toys, assorted handicrafts, even the prosthetics (legs and arms) that the group learned to make after an intensive training program in a technology developed in Japan.

Thus, while Tahanang Walang Hagdanan is able to generate more than 70% of its operational expenses of P19 million annually from these various income-generation projects, this has meant a deep cut in its workforce, that is, the number of paraplegics or members of paraplegics' families involved in any of the group's enterprises. According to human resources

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development officer Lita Evangelista, from a workforce of over 400, Tahanang Walang Hagdanan had to downsize to nearly half last year.

Of the group’s 280 workers, about 170 are disabled, sixty of them women.

The setbacks in orders and consequent downsizing have been across the institution’s programs, which also include sewing, woodworking and packaging divisions.

The In-House Mark

One of the institution’s income-generation prospects is its Christmas cards reproduced from the original paintings of persons with disabilities (PWDs), stamped with the organization’s distinct logo at the back. Tahanang Walang Hagdanan has been making these cards for more than 20 years. The centre is also known for its handmade all-occasion cards that are sold in the institution’s gift shop. These are remarkable for their dried leaves, twigs and flowers, and scraps of cloth or other paper stock arranged and glued, piece by piece, into beautiful designs. The cards are by themselves artwork, and each takes hours to make, Lita stressed. It is no wonder that these cards have attracted customers from all parts of the globe.

Building on the success of its all-occasion and Christmas cards line, the institution decided to expand to other paper-based gift items – calendars, journals, picture frames, coinbanks, tissue holders, jewellery boxes, lampshades and an assortment of other giftware – this time made of cogon-based paper. The plan, which was buoyed by growing demand for environment-friendly and recycled products, was supported in 1998 by a grant from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives that made available to 40 women and 20 men training in the making of cogon paper.

The process is a labour-intensive one that the workers initially found difficult. The cogon grass is first boiled and shredded, then mixed with used paper that has been previously washed. This mixture is cooked again in a large vat, cooled, laid out on homemade frames made with silkscreen, pressed for an even thickness, then dried. Considering the volume of cogon paper made, drying is sometimes both under the sun and with a dryer acquired through the grant.

The institution also tried experimenting with leaves and other kinds of grass as cogon is hard to find during the rainy season. (These are gathered by a group of farmers from Jala-jala, the site of the

The making of cards and other paper products by hand is a labour-intensive process that requires maximum patience.



institution's fishbreeding facility.) But the resulting paper would dismember right away.

"In the beginning we couldn't get the right texture and thickness," Lita says. "But now we have mastered even the colours. Specify any colour, or show us a sample, and we'll be able to produce this almost error-free."

The Canada Fund support also extended to the handmade-paper program the services of a consultant for innovations in product designs. "Considering the time spent on each item, one has to be very diligent and patient," Lita notes. "Each product has a 'personal touch,' and that's why we have to choose the workers carefully."

Depending on the number and volume of orders received, as many as 22 workers would be working on the handmade-paper line. The project also benefits not only the farmers from nearby towns supplying the cogon but also some out-of-school youth that gather the leaves, twigs and flowers used for the designs.

The products are also marketed as corporate premiums and giveaways. Orders from a large car assembler for calling card holders, for example, have been steady. At present, the Department of Tourism has a trial order for decorative fans that will be used as giveaways for the agency's various events.



The making of cogon paper is a long process of washing the materials, including the paper and grass, cooking these in a large vat, pressing, and manual and automatic drying.

Promising Times

A sense of anticipation is in the air also because these days, Tahanang Walang Hagdanan is abuzz, filling a Christmas order from a leading department store distributing wineholders and serving trays of a high-end European brand. The wineholders and trays are made of metal frames fabricated by the metalworks department, rattan and buri accents woven by the

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The intricate designs on the cards made from dried leaves, flower, twigs and paper cutouts

handicrafts department, and wooden handles from the woodworking department. “We are really optimistic about this order. If we do well here, for sure other orders will come,” Lita says.

If that is the case, the group may yet be able to rehire the PWDs or their family members let go last year.

Among other prospects is the fishbreeding program in Jala-jala, Rizal, which received support from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives in 2000 for the requisite training in aquaculture before the project was formally launched. Workers continue to undergo training and study tours until now for specialized skills and information on raising and breeding ornamental fish. The centre is now calling on petshop owners to start sourcing their stocks from Tahanang Walang Hagdanan. Initially concentrating on goldfish and mollies, the project, according to Lita, will soon be ready to venture into the breeding of food fish, particularly the freshwater tilapia.

The determination to become more of a self-reliant, self-help organization has also resulted in the streamlining of the facility’s management. Realizing the need to adapt to changing times, which means keeping abreast with the competition in all its product lines and services, Tahanang Walang Hagdanan reorganized and formed a new Business Operation Division, which will focus on marketing and product development. “The Tahanang Walang Hagdanan logo will become not a symbol of disability but a brand of quality,” the group says.

An Administrative and Welfare Division will be responsible for the continuous development and empowerment of PWDs, and for providing assistance to the many assist as many PWDs that come seeking its support.

Policy Outlook

Even as self-reliance and sustainability are foremost on the minds of the managers of Tahanang Walang Hagdanan, however, the reality is that PWDs’ access to education, disabled-friendly housing, and job opportunities in the country remain tight. Although the workers are encouraged to integrate into their families and the community at large, PWD-friendly housing is limited and expensive.

Few schools, public and private, admit PWDs, thereby restricting them to low-level, low-paying jobs. Of the disabled Tahanang Walang Hagdanan workers, for example, only 25% reached the secondary level, and 5%, college.



Recent orders of wine holders and trays for an exclusive brand augur well for the viability of Tahanang Walang Hagdanan.

The PWD sector is not only into immediate assistance to PWDs through poverty-reduction programs. Tahanang Walang Hagdanan and other institutions and advocacy groups, realizing the obstacles in social systems and structures that hinder the development of PWDs, are in the midst of a campaign for affirmative-action measures in government – that a certain ratio of civil-service jobs be allocated to qualified PWDs.