



The LIFE Model: Improving the Methods and Impacts of Agricultural Extension in Conflict Vulnerable Areas of Mindanao, Southern Philippines

An Introduction

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Abstract

A project entitled “Improving the methods and impacts of agricultural extension in conflict areas of Mindanao, Philippines” commenced in late 2013 and scheduled to conclude in 2019. Key project partners include the Landcare Foundation of the Philippines Inc. (LFPI); the University of the Philippines Mindanao (UPMin); the University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB); and the RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. The project is primarily funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). The Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic, and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCAARRD) of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) has also had a close association with the project and are funding an expanded set of activities overseen by UPMin. This paper introduces the aim and objectives of the project. Subsequent papers present detailed background material and a series of project results to date.

Keywords: agricultural extension · community-based development · conflict · Mindanao, Philippines

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The root of the conflict in Mindanao can be traced back in 1903, with the displacement of indigenous people and Moros upon the declaration of the Philippine Commission law which effectively rendered null and void all land grants made without the authority of the Philippines government. Disharmony and conflict have been occurring ever since at various levels of intensity. Moro groups have been seeking an independent state in Mindanao for four decades. After numerous attempts to resolve the conflicts, a final peace agreement between the Government of the Philippines and the Philippines' largest rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was signed in 2014. While progress on the implementation of the peace agreement has been slow, the Bangsamoro Organic Law which is the basis for the creation of the new independent region was passed in mid 2018. The conflict between the government and the MILF is not the only conflict affecting the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Rather, the conflict situation in Mindanao is multi-faceted, involving numerous armed groups, as well as clans, criminal gangs and political elites.

The effects of the conflict on farmers are multifarious and include lack of mobility for marketing produce and purchase of inputs, physical displacement from the farm, males being distracted from farming thus creating an even heavier burden on women. Importantly for the project, conflict has isolated farmers from

networking opportunities with other farmers, various government and non-government support services, and information providers.

A project entitled "Improving the methods and impacts of agricultural extension in conflict areas of Mindanao, Philippines" commenced in late 2013,¹ with an aim to develop and subsequently apply an improved model for agricultural extension in conflict areas of Mindanao. The key project partners include the Landcare Foundation of the Philippines Inc. (LFPI); the University of the Philippines Mindanao (UPMin); the University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB); and the RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. Primary funding was from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR).

The four specific objectives that are the building blocks to achieving the project aim are listed below:

1. Determine the impact of conflict on both livelihoods in agricultural communities and extension services in case study conflict-affected areas
2. Implement a pilot program of improved extension and livelihood innovations, using the principles and methods largely derived from previous ACIAR projects
3. Analyze the impact of the pilot extension and livelihoods innovation program
4. Engage more broadly with relevant conflict area extension and other agencies outside of the case study areas to share project methodologies and findings.

As at the first half of 2018, the initial development phase of the project has successfully concluded with identification of an improved model for agricultural extension in the conflict-affected parts of Mindanao. The extension model was interactively constructed within an action

1. Although the official project title remains as stated, a more appropriate title might have been 'conflict vulnerable' since not all communities within the study are currently experience active conflict.

research framework at six case study sites in Mindanao. It is termed the LIFE (Livelihood Improvement through Facilitated Extension) model, and it is currently being further evaluated at the study sites and at additional sites.

From an economic perspective, participants' income has been enhanced through diversification into vegetables and tree nurseries, amongst other income-earning farm activities. The income improvements are regarded by farmers as being highly significant in that they have translated into quantum lifestyle changes. The current assessment of income improvement should be regarded as preliminary since farming systems are still evolving. The cost effectiveness of the LIFE Model at one of the sites has been indicated with a positive return on investment of PhP1.6 million in benefits against PhP1.1 million in costs, provided that the current farmer returns can be maintained (Menz et al. 2017).

From a social capital perspective, the research has confirmed a growing level of trust between Christian, Muslim, and indigenous (IP) farmers, which is positively reducing tension and potential conflict across cultural, religious, and ethnic barriers. Social capital development is a core component of the model, and one of the project papers (Predo and Menz 2017) demonstrated a clear correlation between social capital and economic welfare at one of the case study sites. This finding supports the project's approach of promoting agricultural extension with a strong social capital element.

At the individual farmer level, the impact of capacity-building activities is clear through the continuing adoption and expansion of new livelihood enterprises. For example, in one of the sites, of thirty-three farmers who completed a thirteen-module Farmer Field School (FFS), twenty-six adopted a vegetable-cacao integrated agroforestry production system on their farms.

Of eight farmer groups initially created or facilitated by the project, all but two have made significant progress in servicing the needs of their members. One aspect of social capital development has been a better link between farmers and institutions that are in a strategic position to help or collaborate. For example, by becoming properly organised and constitutionally

registered with the Department of Labor and Employment, the farmer groups have been able to access local government programs, receive grants, and have their input considered in the Barangay Development Council planning process, to ensure an ongoing political commitment to their programs. One group, in a little over two years since formation, has grown to the point where it is now receiving direct cash incentives for livelihood innovations from the municipal local government unit (LGU), has opened its own village store, and obtained a collapsible dryer for its community through the Department of Agriculture.

At the institutional level, there has been a noticeable increase in the capacity and willingness of LGUs and other participating agencies to handle ongoing site activities—a result of the training and mentoring provided by the project, and confirmed by (1) the surge of counterpart funds and resources, (2) the increased interest and involvement of the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) in using the project as its key service model, and, of particular importance, (3) LGU plans to replicate—and scale up—the LIFE Model. To date, two municipal LGUs have each adopted a memorandum of agreement (MOA) to work on the model scale-up.

The project currently employs a scale-up strategy that involves two key features:

1. Collaboration with the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic, and Natural Resources Research and Development on testing/validating the model as a potential core new extension modality.
2. Mentoring four new national agencies for the independent testing of the LIFE Model within their own site and institutional setting.

As it appears that the LIFE Model is the only ongoing agricultural extension modality specifically applicable to conflict areas, there is significant potential for its wider application, should it prove consistent with its positive outcomes and impact.

This special issue of the *Banwa Journal* is not intended to report on the totality of project outputs. The project team has embraced a 'write-

as-you-go' philosophy, and reports of many project activities are available in a series of working papers on the web. These working papers are in a preliminary form. The collection in this issue includes more refined versions of some of the key earlier papers and provides an overview of the project, the theoretical background that guided the field work and model development, and a sample of empirical results.

Menz (this issue) presents a brief overview of how agricultural extension modalities have been evolving, including the key role for social capital in agricultural extension, especially within the context of conflict-vulnerable areas.

Puerto et al. (this issue) introduce the concept of social capital in more detail and includes a review of literature that links social capital with economic well-being.

The two papers from Johnson et al. (this issue) focus on the social capital dimension at the case study sites: "Approaches to Understanding Social Capital in Farm Communities of Western Mindanao" presents a range of measures that can potentially be used to measure social capital, while "A Framework for Developing Social Capital Indicators" references a set of suggested social capital (measurement) indicators. Indicators are required because social capital is difficult or even impossible to measure directly.

Vock et al. (this issue) include a description of the LIFE extension model and the processes that underpinned its development.

Menguito et al. (this issue) present initial positive results of farmer surveys assessing lifestyle, economic, and social effects from the application of the model in one case study site—Salman, Ampatuan, Maguindanao. However these are interim results rather than final, as the project is ongoing within an action research framework. This paper aims to describe some positive changes that are occurring. It is not in any sense a final assessment of the whole project, or indeed a final assessment of what has happened at that particular site.

While the project team intended for each paper to be largely able to stand-alone, most of

the papers are interconnected, so readers are encouraged to at least peruse the rest of the collection in order to gain a wider perspective.

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