



WOMEN BEHIND THE THATCH: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NIPA (NYPA FRUTICANS) T

HATCH MAKING COMMUNITY IN LAGONOY, CAMARINES SUR, PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis of women thatch makers in a small village besides the lush mangrove ecosystem of Lagonoy River in Camarines Sur, Philippines. The study aims to identify the needs and assets of the community and the dynamics of their livelihood as nipa thatch makers. The study employed a mixed method research design using focus group discussion, fieldworks, surveys, and in depth interview employing the lenses of various sociological theories in community analysis. Accordingly, the study found out the significant role of women in maintaining their tradition in thatch making. Conversely, the community is struggling due to the shift on market preference, political issues, environmental and societal concerns, among others. Hence, thatch making as a livelihood may face a possible demise if the issues will not be addressed immediately. Moreover, the community has sufficient untapped assets unknown and undiscovered by the villagers. Hence, the study suggests proper valuation and utilization of community assets; strategic development and implementation of mechanisms; and development of community-operated social enterprise is needed to address the needs of the community.

Keywords: *Nipa thatch, women, community needs, community assets, community social enterprise, community analysis, sociological theories*

Introduction:

Nipa thatch is the common and ideal roof for and among rural impoverished and traditional Filipinos. Being part of the *Bahay Kubo*, a national shelter of the Philippines, it is considered as a cultural symbol which describes a simple yet blissful Filipino family. This humble thatch, locally known as *tiklad*, was extracted usually from common-pool resources of the community. Nipa palm (*Nypa fruticans*) is dominant among tropical countries, specifically, among communities alongside the river. According to Hamilton & Murphy (1988), it is the most useful, versatile and fairly component of mangrove forest of Asia and Oceania. It is a mangrove palm that is very useful among the coastal areas in the Philippines (Carandang, et al., 2009). Accordingly, all parts of nipa palm including the trunk, leaves, sap, and roots are traditionally and commercially used in many ways such as medicine, sugar, hat, raincoat, thatch and many others. In the same way, it is the main source of living of some communities in the Philippines including the subject of this paper.

This paper explores the small nipa-thatch making community in Brgy. Burabod, Lagonoy, Camarines Sur. Burabod is one of the villages of Lagonoy, Camarines Sur situated on the east coast of Lagonoy Gulf and besides the lush mangrove ecosystem of Lagonoy River. Along with this historically rich-barangay is the presence of minority-like group located approximately five (5) kilometers away from the barangay's government center. While the majority of the residents of the barangay were clinging towards the improvements of their life- as seen in their ways of living and house structure, this group stays to be modest but struggling over their gradually vanishing microenterprise activities. This small community is rich in natural resources, nipa palm, in particular. Nipa palm is their primary source of livelihood aside from fishing, rice, and coconut farming. In fact, their product is considered as the best *tiklad* (nipa thatch) in the district if not in the region. The quality of the leaves, stick, and string they used in producing it, made them competitively positioned in the market. Though their product is more expensive than others, it is still the most preferred thatch because it lasts and more resilient to natural disasters than those produced in other communities.

This paper provides the profile and problem of the community; an analysis using sustainable livelihood framework, SWOT analysis, and relevant community theories; and suggested community policies and projects for their improvement.

Methods & Materials

The study employed a mixed method research design using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises and questionnaire survey. The community was analyzed through the Sustainable

Livelihood Framework as shown in Figure 1 and SWOT Analysis. In addition, the community was also analyzed through the lenses of some classic sociological theories such as Social Evolution, Political-Economy, Structural/Functional, Open Systems, Conflict theories, symbolic interactionism, social learning, exchange and rational choice theory, critical and feminist theories.

In doing so, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises were conducted where the women of the community were asked to list down available resources of the community in multidimensional approach using the DFID's (2000) Sustainable Livelihood Framework. In such manner, resources can be classified into five categories such as financial, social, personal, human and physical resources. Assessing the resources is essential in crafting the possible policies or strategies for a sustainable livelihood. Chambers & Conway (1992) proposed a composite definition of sustainable rural livelihood as

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term (p.6)

The DFID's SL approach aims to increase the agency's effectiveness in poverty reduction in two main ways: the first is by mainstreaming a set of core principles which determine that poverty-focused development activity should be people-centred, responsive and participatory, multi-level, conducted in partnership, sustainable, and dynamic. The second is by applying a holistic perspective in the programming of support activities, to ensure that these correspond to issues or areas of direct relevance for improving poor people's livelihoods. A central element of DFID's approach is the SL Framework, an analytical structure to facilitate a broad and systematic understanding of the various factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities and to show how they relate to each other. (Krantz, 2001)

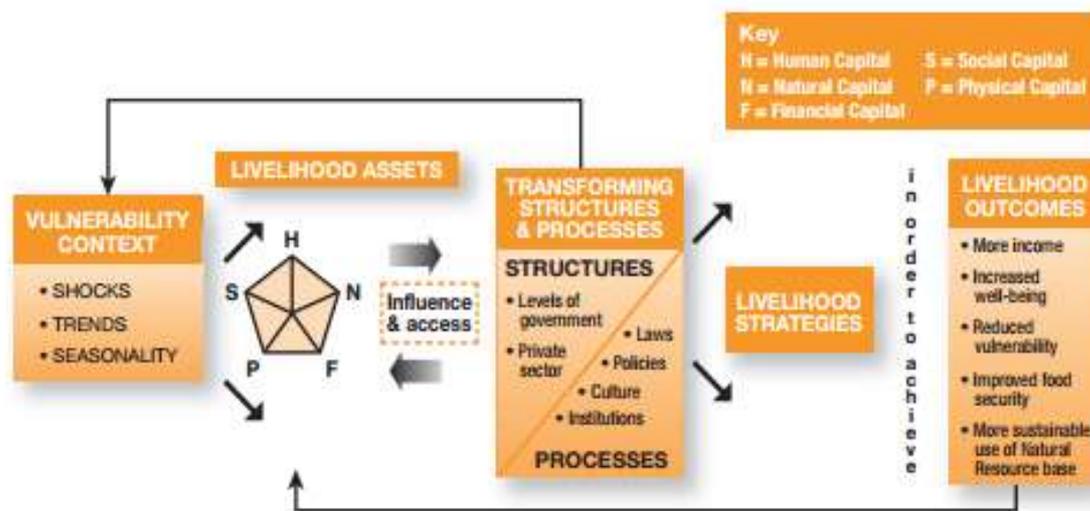


Figure 1. Sustainable Development

Adopted from DFID (2000)

Results and Discussion:

Community Profile

The rural village of Burabod, Lagonoy, Camarines Sur is complete depiction of a communal society or *Gemeinschaft* in terms of the social capital. According to Tönnies, as described by Crossman (2016) *Gemeinschaft*, or community, is comprised of personal social ties and in-person interactions that are defined by traditional social rules and result in an overall cooperative social organization. Since the whole community is attached to one blood relationship or kinship, the values and beliefs of the people are organized around appreciation for personal ties, hence, social interactions are personal in nature. Tönnies believed that these kinds of interactions and social ties were driven by emotions and sentiments, by a sense of moral obligation to others, and were common to rural, peasant, small-scale, homogenous societies (Crossman, 2016)

The community consists of twelve (12) households all engaged in thatch making. Majority of thatch makers are of old age ranging from 50 years old and above. This is quite threatening to their enterprise because commonly the children were no longer involved in thatch making. Most of their children preferred to migrate or work in other communities, in Metro Manila or even abroad, especially those who were able to finish schooling. Also, the community is characterized by having the bigger family size for each household. This factor contributes to the persistence of poverty in the community. According to Reyes, Tabuga, Asis, & Datu (2012) bigger family size correlates with poverty in the Philippines. According to the national poverty threshold for 2015, a household should have at least a monthly income of PhP 9,140.00 (182 USD) to live a better life.

However, it is evident that more than 50% of the households earned even PhP 5000 (100 USD) or less. The household women were not able to reach the tertiary level of education; nevertheless, their children are studying in nearby schools.

Community Problem

As mentioned above, the main problem of the community is the gradual vanishing of their microenterprise activity due to multiple factors such as political, economic, social and environmental issues concerning nipa thatch making. The demise of this microenterprise may be possible if the issues will not be addressed immediately. The foremost concern is political. Although the industry exists for decades already, there was no existing ordinance or support directly to the producers from the local government. There was no financial support or training conducted to appraise the standard of nipa by-products.

Further, there is a control over the transport of their product to their customers through the *Bantay Kalikasan* Task Force, a government program under the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. According to them, they need to seek first a permit from the government before they will be allowed to transport their products. This is too costly for the micro-producers who cannot avail the permit. Consequently, some sell their products to the transporter, a middleman who sells their product to retailers or directly to the buyer. Using the value chain analysis as shown in Figure 2, the routine flow starting from the nipa leaves gatherer flowing through the nipa shingle maker and nipa headgear, then collected by the nipa product middle man, which they, in turn, forwarded to the nipa product seller, that they sold to the end user.

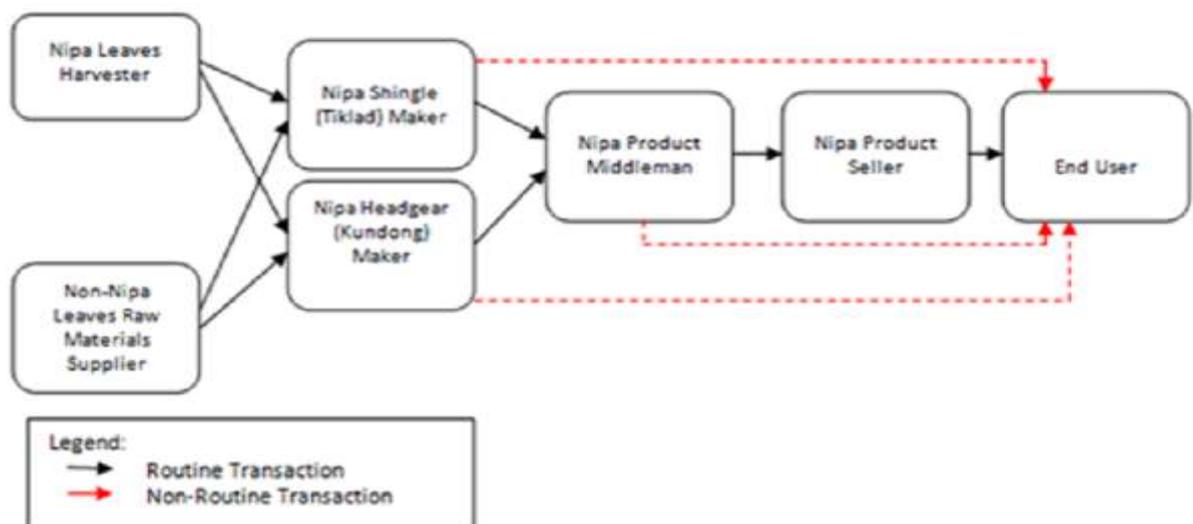


Figure 2. Value-Chain Analysis of Nipa by-products

Another problem of the women thatch markers is the higher operating costs or the expenses that they incurred in producing the product. Customarily, production of nipa is divided according to gender roles. The males are in charge of harvesting a nipa leaves or locally known as *pagsasagasa*. From the root word *sagasá*, it means the act of harvesting the leaves of nipa palm through cutting the leaf's midribs to separate it from the nipa trunk and cutting the leaves at its base to separate it from the midribs. The females, on the other hand, are in charge of preparing the leaves, stick and string and weaving until it became a finished product. After which, the females are commonly in charge of looking for customers and the males are in charge of transporting the product to the customer. However, this concept, somehow, changes as years goes. Since most of the males are busy with their livelihood such as farming, fishing, employment from SMEs in town proper; most of them did not longer perform their function as mang-*sasagasa* (leaves harvester). Consequently, the women thatch makers look for individuals outside the community who will do the *pagsasagasa*. Conversely, the women are complaining about the cost of contracting an individual outside the community because aside from they are paying P250 (2.5 USD) per day by producing five (5) to six (6) bundles or locally known as bugkos, they are also giving packs of cigarettes, snacks, and lunch.

Further, the price of their products is controlled by nipa seller and middlemen. They are also dependent upon the credit extended to them by nipa product seller and nipa product middleman; hence, they cannot negotiate the value of their product. Consequently, the seller earns more than the producer. Table 2 shows the computation of average revenue, cost, and income from the value chain analysis. It shows the ranking where nipa products seller (NPS) and nipa leaves harvester (NLH) earn more than the nipa shingle maker (NSM) and nipa headgear maker (NHGM).

Table 2. Computation of Average Revenue, Cost, and Income

Parameters	NSM	NHGM	NLH	NNRMS	NPM	NPS
Average Revenue	Php 350.00	Php 25.00	Php 250.00	Php 105.00	Php 150.00	Php 1,800.00
Average cost	<u>Php 140.00</u>	<u>Php 4.10</u>	=	<u>Php 62.50</u>	=	<u>Php 1,479.00</u>
Average Income	<u>Php210.00</u>	<u>Php 20.90</u>	<u>Php 250.00</u>	<u>Php 42.50</u>	<u>Php 150.00</u>	<u>Php321.00</u>
Rank	3	6	2	5	4	1

*Note: NSM – Nipa Shingle Maker; NHGM – Nipa Headgear Maker; NLH – Nipa Leaves Harvester; NNRMS – Non-nipa Raw Materials Supplier; NPM – Nipa Product Middle Man; NPS – Nipa Product Seller. For USD conversion, generally 1 USD is equal to Php 50.

The nipa palm in the east coast of Lagonoy Gulf has multiple uses, yet underutilized. Its leaves and leaflets can be used as thatch roof (Tiklad) and headgear (Kundong or sayap); its petioles can be processed as basket, salt, floating material for fishnet; its midribs can be used as string, firewood, and brooms; its fruit or seed can be processed as snacks, salad extender, sweets, pickles; its decaying leaves and roots can be processed as aromatic tea, medicine, and salt; its sap can be processed as vinegar, sugar, alcohol (biofuel) and fermented beverage. The chart in Figure 3 shows that most of the women thatch makers are not aware of the uses of the different parts of nipa palm, lesser on the knowledge and skills in making the by-products and least on the commercialization of the by-product. The process for making nipa shingle and nipa headgear are still manual method, hence the output is dependent on the capacity of an individual limit. Regarding monitoring of their revenue and income, they do not keep records; therefore they cannot properly monitor their income. Skills regarding nipa shingle making and nipa headgear making are transferred from parents to children, and no apparent improvement in methods to address the changing needs of the user, hence no value added benefits that can increase its price.

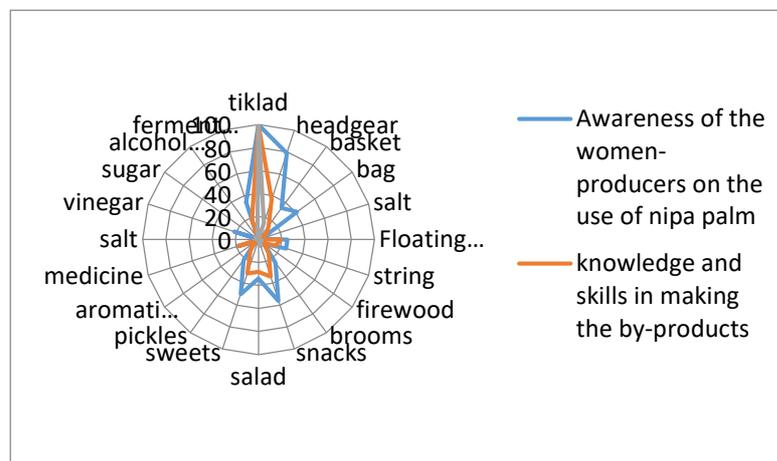


Figure 3. Utilization Practices on Nipa Palm

Another issue confronting the women thatch makers are the ever deteriorating image of the nipa thatch. Aside from it can easily be devastated by the typhoon, which is common to Bicol Region, it is usually attached to rural poor, meaning, those who are using the nipa thatch belongs

to the lower class of the society and the use of galvanized iron sheets (GIS) is usually associated with the higher class.

Lastly, there is a problem on the protection of the sustainability of the nipa palm since there is no mangrove management system employed, as evident in the lack of proper records and monitoring of people involve in nipa palm business. There are also issues of over extraction of the nipa plant. Climate change also poses a threat especially on the quality of the leaves

Community Analysis

Since the problem of the community is centered on their microenterprise activities, the community was analyzed through the Asset-Based Community Development and SWOT Analysis. Undoubtedly, the community is rich with non-monetary resources. Although they are considered as poor using economic poverty measures, they were blessed especially with natural and social resources.

Financial Resources. Most of the households in the community can be described through Filipino idiom '*isang kahig-isang tuka*'. Since households are characterized as low-income earners and daily wage earners, they spend the small amount they get to various expenditures in which the big chunk goes to food. The small amount they get from farming and thatch making is not enough for them to accumulate savings and avail financial investment products. In fact, it is still insufficient for the household to provide the needs of their siblings in terms of educational needs, health, and better clothing. On the other hand, the community has the access to financial facilities such as the microfinance institutions and credit cooperatives. These institutions offer varied financial services such as deposits, loans, payment services, money transfer and insurance products to the residents of the community. Conversely, the (supposedly) objective of these institutions in uplifting the lives of their members or clients did not materialize due to some instances. Consequently, they are burdened with the building-up finance charges. Lastly, the MFIs are not really serious about their social responsibility and are more focused on the management assigned quotas and earnings.

Human Resources. The community is composed of strong and closely-tied twelve (12) households. However, the majority of the households fall below the poverty line as discussed above. There is a prevailing role among men and women where men are assigned to heavy tasks and women are assigned to the soft yet intricate job. However, as discussed on the problem, due to the employment and livelihood of the male members, this role is sometimes not followed. The

women then are contracting the labor of other individuals outside the community or they themselves are doing the job originally assigned to men. All members of the community have the skills, though not all are involved, in nipa thatch making. There is a system of passing the know-hows by teaching or involving the children on the microenterprise activity. However, as mentioned on the problem, the community was stocked on a relatively few by-products such as the nipa shingle and nipa headgear. If the community will be properly trained, they may potentially utilize the potential uses of the nipa palm, commercially.

Social Resources. As mentioned in the profile, the community is rich on social aspect where the ties among the people living in the area are still present. They know each other well and capitalized on their relatedness. There are also issues of conflicts among neighborhood according to them; however, it is inevitable and usually can be solved immediately. In addition, the barangay has organized an annual festival named after their product, though, as discussed this feast should really provide an avenue for the nipa thatch makers to promote their products to other communities and visitors. Further, it can be observed that the present Barangay Captain is very supportive of their endeavor, it is evident when he toured and introduced us to the community.

Personal Resources. Entrepreneurial and cooperative values revealed to be the common values of the community. High demand for quality and efficiency, self-confident, systematic, goal-setting, risk-taking and commitment to work contract are among the personal entrepreneurial competencies exemplified by the community. Self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, honesty, caring for others and spirituality are among the cooperative values. It can be inferred that cooperative form or community-based social enterprise is suitable for the community.

Physical Resources. It can be gleaned that Brgy. Burabod has sources of water, however, 73% uses a water pump and few uses springs for potable water. The majority has electricity and 46% are sheltered in the semi-concrete house. Aside from nipa, there are other potential natural resources available and abundant in the area such as *hlorophora excels* (locally known as karagumoy), *cocos nucifera* (locally known as niyog), *gigantochloa levis* (locally known as botong), *bambusa pungens* (locally known as kawayan), *livistona rotundifolia* (locally known as anahaw), vegetables, fruit bearing trees such as *sandoricun coe'kiet japt* (santol) etc. Moreover, this study also shows that 67% of the households own at least a hectare of land with nipa planted, 13% have 2-3 hectares and 4% have 4 and above hectares of land cultivated for nipa shingles production.

4.2 Environmental Scanning

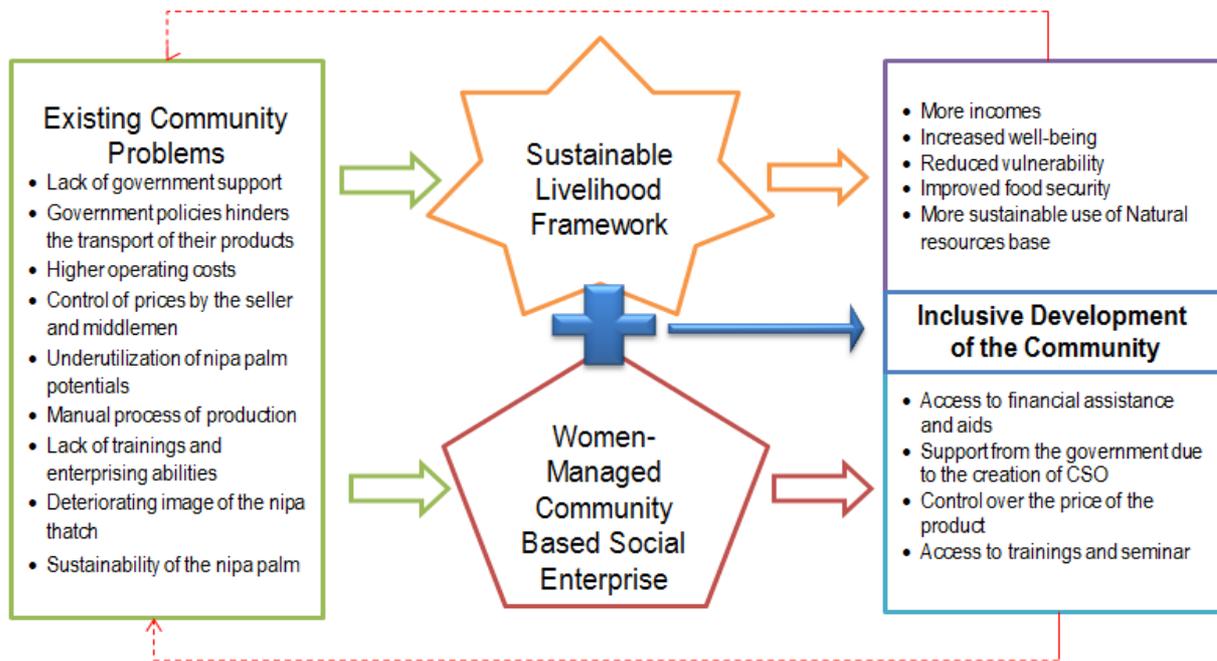
Two sets of facts determine the community: internal and external environment. Internal environment are the factors which can be controlled by the community and external environment are the factors which cannot be controlled by the community but are strategic in accomplishing the goals and objectives of the venture. Internal environments include the strengths and weakness and the external environment includes the opportunities and threats. Scanning the environment is essential in order to frame relevant strategies commensurate to the problems and resources of the community. Table 2 shows the scanned environment.

Table 2. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Livelihood indicators	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Financial Resources	The community has the access to financial institutions and has other source of income	Most households belong to low-income bracket. Enterprising activities are not properly documented	There are various institutions that offers grants and assistance	Cost for the production of nipa thatch is increasing while the prices of it is controlled by the middlemen
Social Resources	There is an evidence of cooperation and active participation among the members of the community	The community lack ordinance for protecting or supporting nipa farmer and policies for utilizing nipa	The community organizes an annual feast named after their product "Tiklad Festival"	Due to modernization, the image of nipa thatch is deteriorating. There is a presence of competition among thatch makers in other communities
Human Resources	Members of the community have varied skills and abilities; knowledge in nipa farming and producing some by-products	The members of the community lack essential knowledge and skills in producing other by-products	There are also NGOs and academe that are willing to collaborate to help the community	Unrestrained health conditions may affect especially the elderly who are still active in producing the nipa.
Physical Resources	There is an abundant natural resources which are untapped and underutilized	The community lack essential facilities, equipment and machineries in producing the by-products	There is a prospect wide market for their product and the potential products out of their resources	Climatic condition is changing and raw materials will soon be scarced.
Personal Resources	Entrepreneurial competence and values of cooperativism is evident among the members of the community	Procrastination, sluggishness are evident among the members of the community	There are institutions that are willing to enhance their competences along with their values and principles	The new generation does consider nipa thatch production as a lucrative job

Developing a Women-Managed Community-Based Social Enterprise

It is evident in the analysis that the community needs to develop a community-based social enterprise. Since, the microenterprise activities are mostly done by women, the study is proposing a women-managed enterprise. This enterprise, in addition to sustainable development



framework may provide an inclusive development in the community, if properly planned and implemented. The combination of it can also solve the existing problem of the society.

Figure 4. Framework for Inclusive Development of the Community

Potential Strategies Developed Using the SWOT Analysis

The following strategic objectives were formulated out of the SWOT analysis and the potential strategies developed. Noticeably, the strategies can be grouped into four strategic objectives such as (1) Organize an effective and well-structured social enterprise; (2) Forge linkage with various stakeholders for capacity-building, product innovation, technology development, access of funding assistance, product and enterprise promotion, climate change mitigation and policy formulation; (3) Develop and innovate diversified products out of nipa and other available agricultural produce; and (4) Promote nipa palm by products and the livelihood as rural tourism.

Conclusion

The small nipa thatch making the community in Burabod, Lagonoy, Camarines Sur is a picture of common Filipino community that struggles over their livelihood and resources. The paper provides clear details of the community, their problems, available resources and their

potentials. In addition, the community were also analyzed theoretically through the lenses different perspectives such as social evolution, political-economy, structural/functional, open systems, conflict theories, symbolic interactionism, social learning, exchange and rational choice theory, critical and feminist theories; and conceptually through the sustainable livelihood framework with the use of environmental scanning and SWOT analysis.

The analysis provides clear insights that a women-managed community-based social enterprise is needed in order to achieve solve the existing problems faced by the community. This enterprise, in addition to sustainable development framework, may provide an inclusive development in the community if properly planned and implemented. That is, following the strategies developed and achieving the vision, mission, and goals of the social enterprise.

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