

Innovative water system boosts incomes in Philippines

MINDANAO, Philippines – Analiza Litozon puts on a good spread for her family: string beans, cabbage, sweet potatoes, cassava, eggplant, black beans, spring onions. All of it she grows in her own vegetable garden next to the home she shares with her husband, Julito, and their three young children, ages 1 to 4.

Analiza often grows enough produce to sell some to her neighbors, along with extra tilapia she raises in a fishpond. Julito also farms the family cornfield, and in many ways the Litozons run a small, sustainable family enterprise.

Their life sounds pretty ordinary, until you consider that just six months ago, there was no garden. There were no vegetables for the children to eat. There was no fishpond in the yard.

That's because here in the small tribal village of Kalinawan, perched in the steep, remote highlands of Mindanao's Bukidnon province, access to clean drinking water is pretty extraordinary.

Before Catholic Relief Services and partners constructed an innovative water system here in December 2006, villagers had to hike more than 1 mile uphill to fetch water from a mountain creek. Round-trip took a good hour on foot.

Analiza used to make three trips a day, she says, each time hauling home 5 gallons of water in a plastic container on her head. This was just enough to meet her family's basic needs for cooking, drinking and washing. Little time or water was left over to develop a garden or fishpond.

Now in Kalinawan stands an enormous ferrocement water tank, a durable cement and wire-reinforced reservoir that stores up to 1,320 gallons of clean drinking water. The tank feeds six common washtubs and two standing faucets, enough for all 40 households in the village to tap.

The immediate water supply allows residents to devote their newfound free time –

and irrigation – to ventures that translate into income, such as vegetable gardening, hog- and fish-raising, and farming.

Without daily hikes to fetch water, Eduardo Saut has more time to spend stripping his abaca crop before bringing it to market. The fibrous plant, also known as Manila hemp, is used in everything from place mats and paper products to marine ropes and plastic parts.

Families like Analiza's also receive startup vegetable seeds and training to learn ecologically friendly gardening techniques that are less dependent on commercial fertilizers and pesticides.

Providing one basic health necessity – access to clean, safe water – has given residents like Analiza and Eduardo the means to build small but secure livelihoods. The next step is extending that leverage outside the village and into the marketplace.

“CRS is able to bridge that gap between a remote area like this and the market,” says Jessan Catre, CRS Philippines marketing project coordinator in Bukidnon. “If you can just unlock the economic opportunity, you unlock so much potential in the community.”

The effort, while new to residents in Kalinawan, has been successful in other villages in Bukidnon. CRS has helped farmers command better prices by forming collectives to boost their bargaining power. Vegetable collectives are now selling their produce at area supermarkets rather than to local traders, and coffee collectives are marketing beans directly to a fair trade buyer.

Having access to the marketplace is a big step, and one they are ready for in Kalinawan. When asked at a community gathering what to do now that folks here are growing a surplus and making products, farmer Jaime Abunda answers plainly, “Logically, we have to sell it.”

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