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RURAL DEVELOPMENT OUTPOSTS BEANS AS "MOTHERS' GROUPS"

by Goh Siew Ching

What can I do about the worms in the cabbage?

The question that launched integrated rural development in the southern part of Negros Oriental province, in the Central Philippines, came from a village woman. It was directed at Dr Fe Sycip-Wale, whose sole commitment at that time -- the late 1960s -- was to promote maternal and pediatric care in that very depressed region of the province.

Negros Oriental was said to be the most backward province in the Philippines in the 1960s. And Dr Sycip-Wale, a pediatrician with Silliman University, had organized "mothers' groups" to discuss health problems in some of the most poverty-stricken villages dotting the province.

"The person who asked that question was not even sure she should ask it," Dr Sycip-Wale recalls. "She apologized that the question was not related to health, but stressed that it was very important to her. It was then I realized that if we were to respond to what the villagers really wanted we would have to help them in matters other than health."

And so the mothers' groups became parents' associations, concerned with all kinds of community welfare and involving both men and women.

These associations led to the founding of the HAND (health, agriculture, nutrition, and community development) program in 1972 by Dr Sycip-Wale at the Marina Clinic in the Negros Oriental town of Dauin. The privately funded clinic is today part of the extension program of Silliman University, in

nearby Dumaguete City.

"What we have been doing here has not been easy," Dr Sycip-Wale says, "but we have gained the confidence and the trust of many barrios (districts) in the area. And this, I have learned, is the first step to promoting and providing primary health to people who have been deprived of these services."

In an average month in 1982 some 260 people were treated at the clinic. Of these, more than half came in for consultation, Dr Sycip-Wale reports, and the rest were follow-up cases. But while the clinic is the most visible project in the HAND program, the main outreach to the rural communities has been the HAND outposts established in nine of the 21 barangays (villages) in Negros Oriental since 1972.

These outposts are tiny shacks erected by the villagers themselves to house the clinics -- and sometimes the medical staff. These front-line clinics are staffed permanently by health workers trained to handle simple complaints such as coughs and colds, and to recognize more serious ailments that need referral to doctors. They also handle "simple injections," according to Dr Sycip-Wale.

The clinics are self-supporting, being funded in most cases from cooperative stores staffed and managed by the villagers themselves. It is also at these clinics that people meet to discuss other problems with agricultural workers, nutritional experts, social workers, and other personnel from HAND teams. Because much of the success of such centres depends on the villagers themselves, leadership training programs have been included in HAND efforts.

"I don't want to give the impression that it's all a bed of roses," says Dr Sycip-Wale. "There have been problems, mainly with funding.

"Five of the nine cooperatives started are not fully active. But the other four are managing well enough to pay the medical workers and buy the bulk of the medicine they need from their own profits."

The latest development, in the barrio of Bolok Bolok, is the establishment of a pre-school program for the children of that area. "You see, we cannot predict how development will move," says Dr Sycip-Wale. "All we can do is provide as much expertise as possible to meet the needs of the people at a level acceptable to them." And with this principle strongly adhered to, the HAND program has been expanding -- although slowly and often "unsurely".

It continues to train traditional midwives in aseptic deliveries; to develop drinking water projects at village level; to preach an unending sermon on the values of nutrition; and to do the "dozens of things coming under the umbrella of HAND objectives," according to Dr Sycip-Wale, who stresses that community development demands time, patience, commitment, and funds.

It has been almost 20 years since the first "mother's groups" were launched. Since then, Negros Oriental has moved from the bottom rung on the "most depressed province" ladder to third from the bottom. Not a dramatic move, and Dr Sycip-Wale does not claim that her HAND program is fully responsible for this advance. But the work being done at the Marina Clinic and at the barangay outposts plays its part -- an important one -- in such progress.

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