

## **Bridge to Progress**

**By Nora Briones**



“What is the distinguishing feature of CASANDRO ARC which you think would make it win the “The Most Progressive ARC” award?”

The question was thrown to one of the senior members of the validating team. As she pondered over her reply, we held our breath in waiting. Then, she broke the silence into a single word we least expected to come out-

“Accessibility,” she said.

“For a very remote community where the clamour for assistance could at least be heard, being accessible is their stepping stone to progress.”

Accessibility, in her context of progress, denotes openness. True enough! CASANDRO Agrarian Reform Community, wrapped tightly in its cocoon for years, suddenly opened its wings, with a jubilant cry to be absorbed into the economic mainstream of the province of Quezon II.

Before the advent of CARP, the community was part of the project site of Bondoc Development Program (BDP) and served as a laboratory for Bondoc Peninsula studies of the German Technological Cooperation (GTZ). The program provided the community with a lot of social mobilization and institutional development activities which prepared them for future participatory projects and programs. The people, however, thought that they will not be able to access projects for economic development and the trainings they received from the GTZ Bondoc Peninsula Project could not be put to use. All their apprehensions were erased when the area was declared and confirmed an ARC in 2001.



CASANDRO ARC, a rice producing area, with its farmers/ARBs shown being provided various rice-related and hands-on trainings.

With its launching, the community hoped for a better life.

CASANDRO ARC is 36 kms from Macalelon, a 4<sup>th</sup> class municipality of Gumaca, Quezon which is almost five hours drive from Metro Manila. Before it became an ARC, these barangays can only be reached by foot. Going to the town then was a problem because the people had to walk through rough and clay roads and cross the San Isidro foot bridge, which was roughly two hours travel. Hauling their produce from the farm posed a bigger problem since they had to pay P5.00 per sack for its transport to the main road.

The ARC was a candidate project site under the World Bank-funded “Agrarian Reform Community Development Project” (ARCDP Phase I). However providing the equity required from the LGU deterred their coverage and access to the program.

Two years later, and under the helm of newly-elected Mayor Ma. Liwayway Tan, CASANDRO ARC was given hope. Mayor Tan, seeing the need of the community for development, loaned six million pesos from the bank to serve as equity for the project, which is 20% of the total project cost. The equity sharing scheme is one of DAR’s sustainability strategies to inculcate a sense of ownership for the project/s by the municipality or the community. This move started the ball rolling for CASANDRO ARC.

From ARCDP I, several agencies and institutions were enticed to provide interventions to the municipality, with CASANDRO ARC as the foci for all collaboration and convergence activities of all development agencies, led by the DAR and the LGU. Thus, a Municipal Technical Working Group (MTWG) was organized, initiated by the DAR through its MARO,

composed of members from different line agencies operating in the ARC and under the auspices and support of the Local Chief Executive and DARPO. The MTWG formulated Annual Action Plans and submitted to the LGU for incorporation in the Municipal Development Plan. As of date, and with its commitment to continue monitoring the development of CASANDRO ARC, the team members would conduct occasional visits to the households even when they are no longer operating in the area. The extension workers and the LGU have developed a special rapport among themselves and CASANDRO ARC was like their second home.

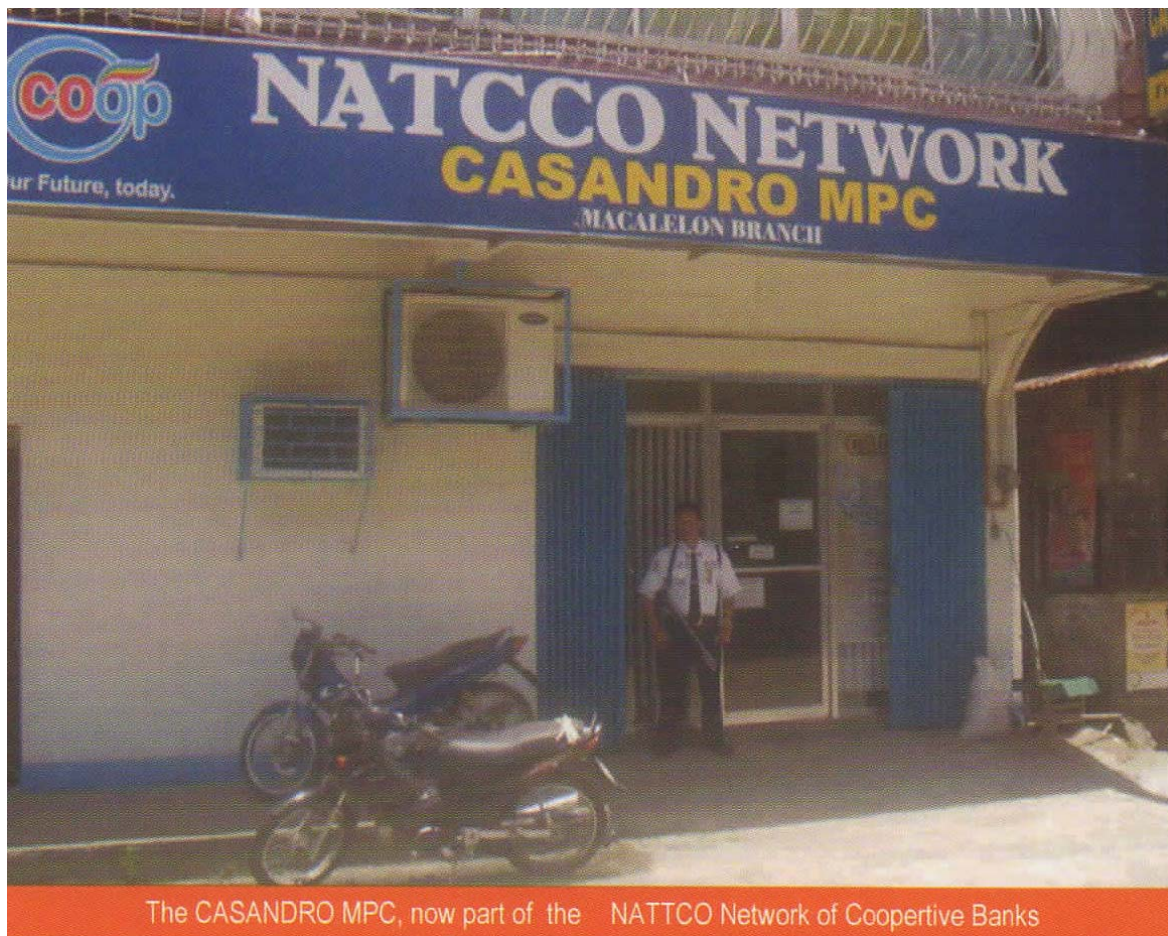
The trainings provided to the community as a laboratory for the Bondoc Peninsula Project of GTZ has become of use. The barangay captains, through their councils, were capable of preparing project proposals and requests for trainings. These were submitted to the MTWG for evaluation and appropriation of funds by the funding institution or the LGU and the ARCDP I. Projects came falling into proper places.

CASANDRO ARC is a rice-producing area with coconut trees in the surrounding lands. The Department of Agriculture provided certified seeds for palay and vegetables, farm equipments, livestock dispersal program, shallow tube wells for small irrigation, and technology trainings on several farm management modules. These interventions led to the increase of production of palay from 150 cavans per hectare per cropping to 180 cavans and the income from vegetable production contributed to at least 30% of their increased household income. On technical assistance, the MARO also trained six (6) volunteers in the ARC who are now providing supervision, technology demo and trainings to farmers, and assisting them in some problems at the farm level, and acting as paratechnologists.

The Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) has no assigned technician in the area but the Provincial PCA Chief visits the place since it is now accessible from Gumaca unlike before when it used to be a remote place. The strong collaboration of line agencies makes it easy for the PCA Chief to coordinate with the DA in its Coconut Replanting Program. From this program, they were able to come up also with a Coco-Corn Intercrop Program together with the organic fertilizer program of DA and the LGU. Likewise, the DA and PCA representatives, during the interview of the visiting team, boasted of their accomplishment with the Gulayan Project intercropped with coconut. They reported that these projects provided additional income to farmers even before the harvest of coconut for copra was due.

The LGU, for its part, provided mechanical dryer, shredding machine, flatbed dryer and supported the micro-organism-based organic fertilizer formulation including bio-mass and vermiculture. Majority of the farming household adopted these technologies, with some who put – up their own organic fertilizer warehouse in their backyard and applied them in their vegetable farms. These made Macaleon's vegetables organically healthy and safe for consumption. Some of the farmers sell organic fertilizer at a very low price to address the problem of high cost of farm inputs.

The farmer-beneficiaries are extensively pursuing organic farming and organic fertilizer formulation. The Municipal Agricultural Officer (MAO), together with the Paratech and households who are now involved in producing organic fertilizers is preparing a program of replicating the organic-based integrated farming in other barangays of Macalelon and hopefully cover the whole province of Gumaca with the hope that the province will be known as an organic-based rice granary of Luzon.



The ARC also boasts of its cooperative which is now one of the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATTCO) model cooperatives with 645 members, majority of whom are ARBs. Currently, the ARB members have been replaced by their sons and daughters who are now actively involved in the operation of the cooperative since most of the original ARB members are now of old age. About 200 members come from the barangays composing the ARC but 76 are original members before SANSTRA was organized. The NATTCO provided also trainings on personality development, networking and fund sourcing. The coop also learned from NATTCO operation through the NGO-coop immersion strategy which resulted to improvement of the coop's income. Likewise, it also benefited from the expanded services of NATTCO which is the establishment of link with the Western Union in providing money remittance services. Currently, the coop has expanded its rice trading program from P100, 000 to P180, 000 with the capital assistance from the LGU and covering markets from Catanuan to General Luna with the rice suppliers coming from the three (3) barangays of the ARC.

True to what accessibility stands for, the ARC has gained attention from the outside world when the cooperative entered into contract with MPWOOD, a processing center manufacturing soft wood for Japanese products of which the source of raw material is the "malapapaya" tree. This is one of the spill-over impacts of the ARC thru the collaborative efforts of DAR-CENRO-SARDIC. The project involves the establishment of "malapapaya" plantation where 2,000 trees/seedlings have been contracted with MPWOOD for a period of five years which is the harvesting year for these trees. The "malapapaya" trees are processed

into soft wood and manufactured as chopsticks, lunch, boxes, toothpicks and other products of same type in Japan. This is the fifth year of the contract and the households involved are expecting a bigger income from the sales of the harvest.

The community and the development partners were not spared of problems in the early part of project implementation. Among them was the acquisition of the right of way by resistant owners in the construction of roads but the ARCDP I road project was realized through charismatic aura and persuasion of the attentive Mayor. There were also delinquent loan payments, but first and foremost that the coop practiced is the utmost consideration of the farmer's situation and humanitarian considerations. The coop adhered to the house-to-house collection scheme in order to collect payments, in a gentle and considerate manner. The community also reflected an active participation of women in the community undertakings. Organizations composed of women like Kalipi and RIC are being tapped for most of the civic and community-based organizations. The display of power among men and women seemed equally felt with the presence of women in most meetings, trainings, seminars and even household projects like the famously known "Macalelon tikoy" and vegetable farming.

In totality, however, the community learned a lot from their development partners and vice versa. CASANDRO ARC has gained respect and reputation from their development partners and the beneficiaries are more inspired to move forward for a bigger challenge. Aware that they have been empowered by a battery of social capital formation activities, educated with current technologies and provided with support services, the community's development direction is now geared towards preserving, protecting and nurturing a healthy environment for the future generation. To the residents of CASANDRO ARC, they may still have a long way to go to become famously known for this, but they believe that they have already taken a very long leap to progress. To Mayor Tan, she affirmed that a leader cannot make progress in her governance if she will not believe in her people. This, she said, she has proven with CASANDRO ARC, worthy enough to be declared one of DAR's Most Progressive ARC of 2009.

Going back to the interview of the validating team, the Planning Officer was right in saying that accessibility alone means progress. It could be a singular term to describe a broad word but true enough, CASANDRO ARC has proven that once the community is unleashed from its shell, potentials are discovered and development will find its way through it.