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Mountainside farmers turn to technology for water supply

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Farmers need water. It is a basic need, not only to water their crops but also to drink and to cook. It is a long, steep climb from the rivers and streams in the valley up the mountain slopes in the Cordillera region in The Philippines where poor, indigenous farmers try to eke out a living.

Englanded is a community of small vegetable growers. Each household owns an average of 1.3 hectares of agricultural land, most of consisting of small, terraced plots on the mountain slopes.

Englanded community organization was formed in 2007 by the community development program of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines (ECP). The organization was formed in response to a request by those farmers to address the water supply problem.

There has recently been a growing threat to their livelihoods as the government encourages foreign investors to purchase land to grow vegetables on a larger commercial scale. In Englanded community, one such investor from England built a huge greenhouse on four hectares of land. Farmers were told that this operation is organic and poses no environmental threat. Farmers doubt such claim.

Farmers use traditional methods of farming, although they use chemical fertilizers and pesticides sometimes, as encouraged by the Department of Agriculture's extension service. They still depend heavily on the market to procure seeds and other agricultural products. This tends to make their farming operations expensive.

Nevertheless, some of their traditional methods of pest control are still practiced, such as planting a diversity of crops and practicing crop rotation. It is good, for example, to plant potatoes after cabbage. Another traditional method of pest control is called dia-digma that allows farmers to allow certain types of natural molecular life on the vegetable plots to eat away harmful pests. This knowledge of dia-digma is passed down generation after generation.

In 2007, the village farmers approached the ECP's diocesan office to find out if they could receive some technical help to provide easier access to a water supply. All the members of the farmers' families would walk down the mountain slope to the water catchment area to fetch water in plastic containers. Children carry small containers while women carry lighter containers and men carry heavy containers. All the households collect rainwater for their household use as well as to water the vegetable plots.

They turned to the diocese to help them ease their water collection practices, also wanting to ensure running water supply to each participating household and their gardens. With technical and financial assistance from ECP they decided to dig a well and use an electric pump and pipes to supply water door to door.

The farmers see a number of benefits in expanding the community organization beyond just addressing the water needs. The organization has created a space for them to come together to share information and concerns.

They are concerned about the expansion of large commercial farming operations as well as cheap imports of vegetables from China. They will address such policy issues that have a direct impact on their lives and livelihoods. They would also like to explore technical options such as growing vegetables in greenhouses. They currently grow flowers in plastic greenhouses, using regular plastic sheets on steel frames, but often those greenhouses do not withstand strong wind.

The creation of the farmers' organization has given them opportunities to pursue their ideas and aspirations.

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