

Mighty River Powers Up Remote Negros Village

By Rita R. Festin, ADB National Officer

Toboso, Negros Occidental – “Isn’t this the worst road that you have ever traveled on?”, Mayor Evelio Valencia told officials of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Japanese embassy when they arrived in far-flung Sitio Vergara in Bug-ang, his town’s most neglected barangay because of its inaccessibility.

The isolation of the barangay is understandable. No well-meaning vehicle owner would want to subject his vehicle to the kind roads that Toboso is known for, made worse by the regular afternoon downpours. Its rocky terrain and clay-like soil will either pierce or sink tires easily. Six-inch grass grows in the middle of the road for pedestrians to step on to avoid mud and puddles. It takes half a day for farmers to bring down on foot one or two sacks of their produce all the way to the barangay-proper six kilometers down, while renting a carabao would cost P300. More often than not, farmers would just leave behind their produce to rot at home if they are not sold. Hence, residents are cut off from economic activity and remain poor.

Next to rehabilitated roads, residents yearn for electricity to improve their lives. The local electric utility Central Negros Electric Cooperative (CENECO) could not connect them to the grid due to the high cost and lack of economic activity. Thus, when ADB, through its Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, came in and proposed a micro hydro power plant for sitios Vergara and Magtuod, it was a dream come true. But the dream took a long time to materialize.

The project was not readily accepted by residents, most of whom could not believe that a multi-million project would be set up in their remote barangay, without any strings attached, nor was it a loan requiring any pay-back. One version even says the project was a smokescreen for a treasure hunting expedition in Dalinson River.

Giovanni Templado, chairman, Barangay Bug-ang, led the non-believers. “Hindi ako naniniwala kasi maraming palpak na coop e. Ngayon, totoo na. Magpasalamat ako. (At first, I did not believe in it because there are so many failed cooperatives. Now, I can see that it is for real. And I am so grateful.)”

It took Winrock International, the project’s implementing agency, a couple of years and many meetings and dialogue until some residents finally embraced the project, that they would be provided electricity and livelihood as well. They also had to be trained to form and manage their own cooperative to run the project under the name Vergara Magtuod Development Cooperative or VEMADECO which now has over 100 members consisting of farmers and hacienda workers. Thus, when the power plant was finally commissioned on 30 May, it was a cause for celebration comparable to a feast, with fireworks in the middle of the day, loud dance music blaring from a karaoke machine, and a roasted pork especially fattened and seasoned with lemongrass served as the main course. Residents dedicated and sang a song to the tune of “Mamang Sorbetero” in gratitude. Overwhelmed by the outpouring, the Japanese official belted out the theme song from the popular Japanese cartoon series “Voltes Five” to the crowd’s glee.

The project, dubbed “RENEW Negros”, is an innovative poverty reduction project to pilot renewable energy and livelihood development in poor off-grid rural communities. There will be 11 renewably energy systems built, consisting of micro hydro power plants, solar/biomass hybrid systems, and hydraulic ram pump systems. The three micro hydro power plants will have an aggregate output of 85 kw that will run rice and corn mills and energize 500 homes.

Besides the micro hydro power plant in Toboso, another 32kw micro-hydro power plant, with a project cost of P7.6 million, was commissioned in Sitio Balea, Barangay Laga-an, Municipality of Calatrava. In August, the 21kw micro hydro power plant in Barangay Baclao will likewise be commissioned. The two solar/biomass hybrid systems in Molocaboc and Sipaway islands will have a drying capacity of 100 kilos of marine products per day, creating a ready market for the fish catch for the fishermen in the two communities. The hydraulic ram pumps will benefit 360 families in six sitios who will have a daily water supply of almost 500,000 liters for household and school use and to irrigate farms.

An important component of the project besides the renewable energy project is the provision for livelihood activities, under a microcredit fund known as "RENEW Fund" to be managed by the Negros Women for Tomorrow Foundation. It will provide residents up to P5,000 loan for electricity connection and livelihood development to purchase fertilizer, carabao, etc at very low interest rates and a flexible repayment schedule.

Governor Isidro Zayco has been pushing for the building of hydroelectric plants. There is an energy shortage in this province, resulting in rotating power outages which have already damaged household appliances and electrical equipment. Since the province is endowed with seven large rivers and abundant rains even during summer, it has a huge potential for hydroelectric power. There is so much rain that it is easy to plant "tubo" which produces sugar, hence the town's name "Toboso".

In Toboso town, they used to rely on the use of kerosene, batteries, candles, and traditional biomass fuel for their electricity. Now, with the commissioning of the P7.4 million 32kw micro-hydro power plant, tapping the Dalinson River, households can use CFC light bulbs at night so that students can study and housewives can perform chores without inhaling toxic fumes from kerosene lamps. The grain mill operation will boost the production of rice and corn in the area, reduce the cost of processing/milling in nearby communities, and ensure better market and price for their produce. All these at only a cost of P5.50 per kw, which is cheaper than the cost of buying kerosene which is P44/liter, or almost P200/month savings per average household. With the improved disposable income, and the availability of group funds, some members can now engage in backyard livestock raising

At the inauguration rites, Yongping Zhai, ADB Principal Energy Specialist acknowledged the people behind the project, from the Japanese government who funded it, the Department of Energy who is the executing agency, and Winrock International who implemented it. "But even with the equipment, with all the expertise we have, we cannot do it without you. Thanks to you, we have been able to achieve it," he told VEMADECO members and residents who had gathered for the commissioning ceremony.

"What makes this project even more remarkable than just another energy project is that it is environment-friendly to nature," Kohei Noda, financial attaché of the Japanese embassy noted.

"Kung wala sila, hindi kami aangat at wala kaming tsansang aangat kung hindi sila dumating dito. Kung aasa lang kami sa gobyerno, matagal, aabutin siguro kami ng 50 years. Mga two years lang ito, nagkaroon na kami nito. (If it were not for your help, we will not be able to improve our lives and we would not have had a chance to improve our lives if they had not reached us here. If we rely on the government, it would take long, maybe 50 years. This project only took 2 years before it materialized," says Rico Rivera, VEMADECO cooperative president. He has resigned from his job as hacienda worker to work full-time at the coop.

Residents in Sitio Vergara can now end their isolation with their river-powered electricity in place. “While the electricity will not totally solve the community’s isolation due to the existing bad roads, the presence of electricity will boost agricultural production and economic activities that will eventually get the attention of local leaders and business interest resulting to more development interventions in the area,” says Jim Orprecio, of Winrock International.

He also noted other benefits that the project will bring. “Students can study better, indoor pollution will be reduced, productive use of renewable energy for agri-based livelihood projects will be promoted, the environment will be protected to ensure sustainable operation of the micro-hydro power plant, agricultural productivity and income will increase, and food security the overall quality of life will be improved,” he added.

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