



Bohol: Striving toward Sustainable and Sovereign Food System

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ABSTRACT. Bohol, once considered among the poorest provinces in the Philippines, is striving to attain sustainable and self-sufficient agricultural food production. This journey has been made possible by efforts among multisectoral groups to join hands and collaborate for Bohol's progress. These groups mainly include nongovernment organizations, people's organizations (such as farmers', fishers', and women's organizations), consumer groups and cooperatives, the local church, the academe, and local government offices.

KEYWORDS. Bohol· sustainable agriculture· local government· agricultural self-sufficiency

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Bohol was among the first provinces to enact a Provincial Environment Code, which codified legislations and policies for the protection of the island-province's environment. The drafting and enactment of the code was the result of a multisectoral consultation process. The code established the Bohol Environment Management Office (BEMO) responsible for overseeing the implementation of the code. Interestingly enough, while the code identifies various ecosystems in the province and the legislative protection need for each, agriculture was not included, considering that this sector is the largest user of natural resources in the province.

In 1999, different organizations—from the government, farmers, civil society, business, and academic sectors—that were implementing agricultural programs came together to revive a province-wide network that had become inactive for several years. This network, called the Bohol Initiators for Sustainable Agriculture and Development (BISAD), became the primary body advocating organic agriculture in the province. The network engaged its member organizations in organic-agriculture

research and development, farmers' training and advocacy, and marketing and promotion of organic products. The BISAD, with the Provincial Agriculturist's Office (PAO) as one of the key organizations, continued to push for organic agriculture in the province.

In 2003, civil society groups mainly based in Manila launched a hunger strike at the Department of Agriculture to protest against the government's plan to adopt a policy allowing the planting and commercialization of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Although the month-long hunger strike failed to stop GMO commercialization in the country, the issue mobilized BISAD to lobby the provincial government to declare Bohol GMO-free. The lobbying campaign involved farmers, consumers, NGOs, and the local Church. The business sector also expressed support for such a declaration.

MONITORING GMOs IN BOHOL

As a result of the people's lobbying, the Sangguniang Panlalawigan (Provincial Council) adopted Provincial Ordinance 2003-010 called "The Safeguard against GMOs," which was promptly signed into law by the provincial governor. The ordinance prohibits the entry, use, and propagation of GMOs in the province to safeguard the health of Boholanos and protect the environment. It provided for the creation of the GMO Monitoring Committee tasked with overseeing the ordinance's enforcement. The committee is composed of representatives from the government, civil society, and business sectors.

Sometime in 2005, the committee received report that a representative of Monsanto was giving and selling seeds to farmers in the province. Apparently, the Monsanto representative did not coordinate with the local government, particularly with the Provincial Agriculturist's Office (PAO). Concerned that Monsanto was introducing Bt corn seeds illegally into the province, the committee called on the representative to a meeting where he was asked by the committee to present proof that he was not giving out GMO seeds to local farmers. After that meeting, they never heard of the Monsanto representative again. This incident somehow showed that the Boholanos were serious in asserting its GMO-free status.

Besides monitoring reports of possible GMO intrusion, the GMO Monitoring Committee for a time also put up billboards in key ports of entry to Bohol, including the Tagbilaran airport, informing arriving passengers about the prohibition against the entry of GMOs into the

province. The committee, with the help of NGOs and farmers' groups, also distributed information materials about GMOs to the public. In 2007, the committee, together with BISAD, sponsored a mural-painting contest among students depicting Bohol's GMO-free declaration. The murals can be seen on the concrete fence fronting the Bohol Cultural Center facing Tagbilaran's main avenue.

With the raging issue on Bt Talong, a GMO variety,¹ Bohol's sustainable agriculture and environmental advocates acted immediately. BISAD submitted an appeal to the Sangguniang Panlalawigan for the adoption of a resolution, based on Bohol's GMO-free status, calling on Agriculture Secretary Proceso Alcala to stop the field testing of Bt Talong and its commercialization. In early October 2010, the Sangguniang Panlalawigan Committee on Agriculture called a meeting with BISAD and PAO representatives to discuss the matter. With both BISAD and PAO urging the provincial council to pass an anti-Bt Talong resolution, the head of the Committee on Agriculture submitted a committee report to the Sangguniang Panlalawigan endorsing the passage of a resolution against Bt Talong field testing and commercialization. It was expected that the provincial council would adopt the proposed resolution soon.

IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Aside from ensuring that Bohol's farmers will have non-genetically modified seeds, local sustainable agriculture advocates are pushing for the use of locally adapted farmer-developed varieties. The Bohol program of the Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE) members of BISAD and PAO together launched a provincial program on plant genetic resources conservation and development. The program aimed to train local farmers in conserving and breeding rice varieties. It started in thirteen towns in coordination with the municipal governments through the Municipal Agriculturist's Office. This program works closely with the Bohol Island State University, formerly the Central Visayas State College of Agriculture, Forestry and Technology. The agricultural research department of BISU provides technical assistance and training to farmers and manages a seed bank of more than two hundred varieties developed by local farmers.

The Provincial Government of Bohol through its Provincial Agriculture Office also established the Bohol Organic Agriculture

Technology Center in Ubay, Bohol, to showcase the organic technologies generated by the office and shared to the farmers in the province. The Assistance for Barangay Agricultural Growth, a collaborative project of PAO and a partner people's organization, also showcases farmer scientists and trials of endemic species of rice and vegetables in a modeling approach.

In 2009, BISAD and PAO drafted a proposed provincial program called GREENLIFE Bohol that would officially adopt organic agriculture as the flagship strategy for agricultural development for the province. The program promotes organic agriculture through research and development, farmers' training and education, policy advocacy, and local certification and marketing of organic products, among others. The GREENLIFE program was submitted to the Sangguniang Panlalawigan even before the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 was enacted. The elections however, suspended discussions of the proposed program, and it was revived only after the new administration took over. There has already been a series of discussions on the GREENLIFE with the Sangguniang Panlalawigan Committee on Agriculture, and a final draft of the proposed program was adopted by the committee. Like the Bt Talong resolution, the Sangguniang Panlalawigan is expected to enact the GREENLIFE ordinance soon. Once enacted, the province plans to organize a Provincial Organic Agriculture Summit launching the GREENLIFE program with Secretary Alcala invited to grace the affair. This event is targeted in November 2010.

CHALLENGES

Despite advances made in Bohol for a GMO-free sustainable agriculture, there continues to be many challenges along the way. In the past, local initiatives in sustainable agriculture have been adversely affected by national government programs promoting conventional chemical-based agriculture. With the passage of the Organic Agriculture Act and Secretary Alcala's pronouncements to support sustainable agriculture, we certainly look forward to a more favorable environment for our sustainable agriculture initiatives.

There are also private projects being introduced and undertaken in Bohol that have impacts on the local environment and agriculture. These include large-scale plantations for household oil processing and agrofuels production. There was even a foreign application for the culture and production of biofuel seaweeds in an area totaling about

one hundred thousand hectares at the Danajon Reef, one of only six double-barrier reefs in the world, located along the northwest coast of Bohol. Bohol's sustainable agriculture advocates continue to critically address these issues in order to protect the island's agro-ecological systems.

CONCLUSION

With climate change causing adverse environmental effects all over the world, Bohol as an island ecosystem is highly vulnerable to erratic weather and climatic patterns and warming temperatures. We hope that efforts by Bohol's sustainable agriculture advocates, farmers, and the local governments to promote organic agriculture will help the province adapt better to climate change and contribute to its mitigation. In solidarity with communities, local governments, and other sectors throughout the Philippines and with peoples and nations across the world, we hope that Bohol will be able to help transform our agriculture and food system to one that is more equitable, sustainable, and sovereign. ❀

NOTE

1. As explained by SEARICE: "The eggplant is one of the country's most important food crops both economically and culturally. The Philippines is the sixth largest eggplant producer in the world and the industry itself is worth around PHP 3.1 billion annually.... Unfortunately, the eggplant's role in the Filipino's way of life may soon change should government allow the commercialization of a genetically modified variety of eggplant. Unknown to many, field tests have taken or are taking place in different parts of the country to evaluate the performance of this GM eggplant as a prerequisite to its possible commercialization" (2010, i).

REFERENCE

- Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE). 2010. *Bt Talong: Bitter Truths Behind a Risk-Prone Biotechnology*. Quezon City: SEARICE.

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