

# Gender and Environment: The Case of the Vanishing River

**The choice of Hilongos as one of two GBI project sites came by chance.**

Full socio-economic profiles had been taken of the initial target, coastal Baybay municipality<sup>22</sup>, when the Project Manager came to call on its mayor to finalize the agreement. After an hour of cooling her heels while waiting for the mayor, the project manager realized that the cold reception boded ill for the project. Neighboring Hilongos became the quick alternative, a fateful choice for both project and municipality.

Hilongos, in fact, had several things to commend it, not least of which was a highly-placed female champion, Vice Mayor Altagracia Villaflores herself who, from the start of her public service and well into her 80s, is going full steam with projects that put food on the table (gardening and nutrition) and take care of the children (day care centers), among various others. A measure of Vice Mayor Gracing's commitment is the fact that once, while recuperating from a cataract operation, she joined sorties to depressed and remote barangays in rainy weather to introduce bio-intensive gardening, consequently developing surgical complications.



Another critical factor was that 64% of Hilongos total land area was planted to various agricultural crops—coconut, rice, root crops, abaca—and the WAND-UNIFEM project wanted to make an impact in terms of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) no. 1 which seeks to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty. A 2003 country report indicated that the Philippines is within reach of all of its MDG targets except for two: reducing hunger and improving maternal health (MDG no. 5). Hence, the choice of an agricultural municipality, to better track project impacts on hunger through increased yields. Hilongos, in fact, posed a challenge: its low malnutrition rate (13%) belied the reality of growing poverty.

And so the Hilongos LGU-CSO team eagerly joined the November 2004 National Inception Workshop; followed in quick succession by TWG meetings, barangay orientation sessions, focus group discussions among farming and fishing folk, one rousing women's forum that drew several hundred participants, mostly female; introduction of forms and questionnaires; and data gathering that had to be sex-disaggregated.

The gender analysis of farming and fishing in Hilongos was an eye-opener: women realized that they had as much right to be called farmers and fishers as their menfolk. A parallel analysis of the town's agriculture PPAs revealed that Hilongos had no agriculture plan to speak of for 87% of the agriculture budget went to personnel services.

Still, there was palpable skepticism voiced in village women's query "Will the project give us livelihood?" and a general concern, "Will the project end up somewhere?" Some agricultural staff did not seem to care much about the forms being introduced.

Major findings of the gender appraisal report, shared third month into the project (February 2005), helped explain this lukewarm attitude: long-term, massive and intensive river quarrying had devastated irrigation systems, depriving thousands of hectares of rice fields of water.

The consequences, gender and general, were dire: mothers leaving to work elsewhere as domestic and craft workers; fathers venturing to far-away places for work, their wives and young children left on their own; young girl graduates from elementary school turning to paid domestic work, giving up dreams of secondary school; and grade school enrolment dropping dramatically. These stark realities confronted farming folk deprived of their annual second harvest in the past three and a half years.

There seemed to be some basis for the nagging skepticism: would the project put an end to quarrying, and rehabilitate the irrigation systems damaged partly by substandard construction materials and largely by quarrying; or would it lead nowhere?

Villagers recalled the time when work on farmlands (such as fertilizing) pursued the men folk; now, there was hardly any work available, a sign of God's wrath said the more superstitious. Children were forced to accompany fathers to other barangays to thresh and glean during harvest season, interrupting schooling in March and October. Two illegal recruiters had introduced trafficking to the barangays at a fee of P500 per child until parents filed charges against them.

Some housewives turned to petty selling, but there were no customers, with scarce resources reserved for rice purchase. Worse, farmers sank deeper in debt to traders who loaned them fertilizers and pesticides. A loan worth P1,000.00 was paid with a sack of rice and P300.00 in interest, leaving hardly anything from the harvest for family consumption. It seemed that farmers' toil only benefited rice traders. NGO loans to farmers remained unpaid.

Who benefited from ten years of quarrying? They are the five concessionaires with six barges, whose aggregate sand and gravel shipments totaled about 20,000 cubic meters daily. The quarrying reportedly came without public hearing, with the governor and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources ignoring opposition from the municipality. Net sales for this period was estimated at P35 million; and yet, the concessionaires to date owe the municipality P5 million in unpaid taxes.

Adversely affected were 742 hectares of rice fields feeding over 1,200 households in 11 barangays. Villagers wryly remark that the water level is over one meter lower than the rice fields. Mountains of sand and gravel as high as coconut trees line the river beds.

Shipments go to nearby Bohol and Cebu and as far as Davao in Mindanao for Hilongos reportedly has the finest sand and gravel in the country.

In Hilongos, the gender trail leads straight to a dying river and blighted lives and livelihoods. When the Hilongos LGU team listed hectares rehabilitated and agricultural production increased as indicators in a planning session, project staff pointedly remarked that they should also count households stabilized as gender indicators.

All issues are, after all, women's issues.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Annex 3 for a fuller socio-economic profile of Hilongos.
- <sup>2</sup> According to data drawn by WELFARE from the 1998 Comprehensive Land Use Plan of Hilongos, non-profit organizations included 87 cooperatives, nine NGOs and four irrigators' associations.
- <sup>3</sup> See Exemplifying Gender and Governance on page 10 for a fuller profile on the vice mayor.
- <sup>4</sup> A joint Hilongos-Sorsogon City activity, the workshop and its inputs are summarized in this chapter.
- <sup>5</sup> Among the impacts of GRRB in other countries, Lazo cited a 40% increase in Mexico City's budget for reproductive health and additional funding for women-related programs, child support for primary caregivers of young children from poor households in South Africa, and gender analysis informing the background document to India's budget.
- <sup>6</sup> The latter covered individual interviews and eight FGDs among barangays in upland, lowland and coastal areas. Interviewees and FGD participants numbered 152, with women constituting 66% of the total. Serving both orientation and data-gathering functions, consultation-dialogues with farmers and women's groups were held in each of the pilot areas, drawing an aggregate of 119 participants, 79 of whom were women (66%).
- <sup>7</sup> See Annex 5 for a summary of findings of the gender study in agriculture in Hilongos.
- <sup>8</sup> In the latter, only men were active in the seaboard patrol, mangrove conservation and fish sanctuaries. In the former, agricultural programs reflected a mixed profile with women receiving farm inputs, applying for credit, getting and planting seeds; while men are recipients of cow and *carabao* (water buffalo) dispersal and post-harvest facilities. Men get materials for water systems and undertake drilling while women prepare food. In the plant now pay later schemes, men receive mango seeds while women receive rice seeds. Men are invited to extension services but the women attend.
- <sup>9</sup> Hilongos LGU representatives included the SB secretary, two police representatives, two representatives from the municipal social welfare department, and the following municipal officers: accountant, agriculturist, budget officer, assessor, environment officer, and transportation officer. Also present were four national agency and two NGO representatives.
- <sup>10</sup> Apart from a review of basic gender concepts and manifestations of gender bias, the workshop focused on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). These are summed up in 13 rights foremost among which are the right to life, liberty, equality, privacy and freedom of thought.

- <sup>11</sup> CSO mapping included 28 organizations—cooperatives, women's and social development NGOs, livelihood groups, religious and socio-civic organizations, youth and sports associations, and a number of trade groups including motorcycle drivers, farmers, fish and market vendors, and four irrigators' associations.
- <sup>12</sup> The full plan appears in Part II input C.2. The project manager noted that objectives must focus on needs, resource materials and market competitiveness. The two-year strategic plan, she added, must be operational and include delineation of areas, specific barangays, hectareage, number of farmers and sex-disaggregated data essential to planning. There must also be objectively verifiable or performance indicators. She further indicated that this plan would become the basis for the executive-legislative agenda in the next two years.
- <sup>13</sup> Inasmuch as this was a joint activity summarized in the Sorsogon chapter, this account will only cover highlights specific to Hilongos.
- <sup>14</sup> See "GAD Mainstreaming Strategy Phases and Entry Points" in Part II, input A.1.4 for more details on the GAD mainstreaming evaluation framework.
- <sup>15</sup> This is likewise a joint Hilongos-Sorsogon City training activity and discussions mostly pertinent to Hilongos are included here.
- <sup>16</sup> An example provided of the first type of PPA was the human resource development office (HRDO) which should provide women employees equal access to training opportunities. The Hilongos municipal agriculturist protested that this did not apply to their situation since it was a patently HRDO concern. The resource person countered that if women employees have less access to outside training opportunities, service delivery is affected not only in the agriculture department but in other departments as well. If this issue is recognized by the Department of Agriculture, it can be included in the sectoral plan and later lobbied with the municipal HRDO.
- <sup>17</sup> For the Hilongos plan: there should be indicators for extreme poverty: MDG no. 1 can become strategic goal no. 1, to reduce poverty by so much percentage; MDG no. 2 can become strategic goal no. 2, to reduce the number of malnourished children by how many; and MDG no. 7 can become strategic goal no. 4.
- <sup>18</sup> The Hilongos team was urged to act now, mobilize for the revocation of quarrying permits, employ mass media, lobby with CSOs, do political mapping, ally with the church, consult experts and lawyers, and negotiate and dialogue with concessionaires fully armed with facts. With the permits due to expire only in 2006, data should be presented on the negative social effects such as people dying, getting sick or hungry.
- <sup>19</sup> Inasmuch as the major inputs at this activity are discussed in the Sorsogon report, this section shall only deal with points in the open forum pertinent to Hilongos, and the re-entry plan of Hilongos CSOs.
- <sup>20</sup> According to the project manager, one powerful person to deal with, although unelected, is the mayor or governor's wife. The resource person remarked that most LGU women's organizations are headed by wives of the local chief executives (LCE) who can maneuver to get the GAD budget. Unfortunately, the activities supported (e.g. benefit dance, ballroom dancing, cooking, etc.) do not seek gender equality or women's empowerment. Conclusion: kinship plays a critical role in local governance.
- <sup>21</sup> See Part II, input A.2.4, for "Governance and Venues for People's Participation".
- <sup>22</sup> *Baybay* is Cebuano for seashore.