

Restoring Antequera weavers' income and pride: Barefooted then, with slippers now

by Lorenzo F Templonuevo

Our parents in their time had slippers. Now in this worst time ever we've gone barefooted. This was how the basket weavers of Antequera (an agricultural municipality in Bohol Province, Central Visayas) described their plight during a meeting they attended in October 2008 with government and business representatives at the *Poblacion*.

In such a worst of times, the Antequeranhon weavers were no longer making money. Due largely to the existence of at least four middlemen between these weavers and the sole exporter (Cebubased 33 point 3 Exports Inc) of their woven produce to the international markets, their selling prices had been pushed down to profitless levels. This situation forced many of the local weavers to discontinue the craft with a heavy heart, a situation that made Antequera to reluctantly share its ageold renown of basket weaving dominance to the other municipalities in Bohol that have belatedly learned and gone similarly into producing functional and exportable woven items such as fruit and bread baskets, bags, bowls, placemats and plateguards. This turn of events undermined two vitally important things for the Antequeranhons – income and pride.

As a result, this slowdown in weaving activities aggravated the already lowly plight of the local folk. Making both ends meet to ensure food on the table at every mealtime became harder. Not a few parents shed a tear as they made the difficult decision of asking their kids to quit school. Access to medical care for those who went ill became less affordable.

Fastforward to February 2009. At another multistakeholders meeting at the *Poblacion*, two Antequeranhons, **Filoteo Pana** and **Conrado Dagan** – were already talking about a more

favourable situation. *"Happily now, we are up on our two feet again and with slippers on. We are hopeful that, with additional exporters coming, we will afford to buy shoes for us and the kids!"* Below is their joint story.

For two important reasons Filoteo Paña is a household name in the Antequera village where he and his family live. As the *Kapitan ng Barangay*, Filoteo provides headship in running the village's government affairs. As a basket weaver who also doubles up as a leader – a functional title given to someone who oversees the work of and buys the finished baskets from a group of weavers – he provides a human face to hundreds of Antequeranhon weavers who rely on the indigenous craft for their direly needed household income or its augmentation.



Among the Boholanos, Antequera has since time immemorial been regarded as the province's basket weaving capital. Needless to say, this accolade has been a source of healthy pride for the people of Antequera. The municipal Mayor Cecille Rebosura intimates *"As early as the beginning of the 20th century, our foreparents were already weaving and selling bukag* (oversized baskets made from bamboo, rattan and occasionally from a local fiber called *nito* and used mainly for storing and carrying rice planting materials). The lady local chief executive also said that *"about 70% of the local populace are engaged or associated in some ways in basket weaving activities. And that their earnings from this source support their children's schooling."* Filoteo agrees. The money that he and his wife make from weaving, buying and selling baskets enables them to send their 19 year old youngest son to the Bohol Institute of Technology for a course in BS Criminology, his colleague at the *barangay* government and fellow weaver Conrado Dagan and his wife now manage to send all their three children to school.

GTZ, the German Government's international development enterprise, has cooperated with the Philippine partners for more than 33 years. We strengthen the capacity of people and institutions to improve the lives of Filipinos in this generation and generations to come. Together we work to balance economic, social and ecological interests through multi-stakeholder dialogue, participation and collaboration.

With an expanded line of internationally accepted products that employ *bapaw* (an intricate and more expensive looking weaving technique introduced in the province and in Antequera in 1997), the locally produced woven items have become very in demand in international markets. While this development has brought a lot of renewed opportunity and a brighter prospect for the Antequera weaving industry, the big demand sadly gave rise over time to individuals who want to get a 'share of the cake' at the expense of the lowly basket weavers. Hence, the worst time mentioned earlier came about.

When this bad situation was raised passionately by Filoteo, Conrado and their peers at last year's multistakeholders meeting at the Poblacion (in the presence of their exporter Mr Jenifer Cruz), structural changes were readily implemented. A week later the change brought down to two from four the layers of buyers between the weavers and the exporter. Moneywise, this raised the minimum average profit to between five to ten pesos for every placemat or bag that is produced.

Encouraged and empowered by the result of this series of multistakeholders meeting and the exporter's move, the Antequeranhon weavers recently joined a trade fair in search of additional exporters who are able to bring their products to other international destinations. This active search for more exporters is rooted in the weaver folk's realization that with more exporters to transact with, their negotiation leverage is increased and the demand for and prices of their woven items are enhanced.

The multistakeholders meetings, attended by Filoteo and Conrado on 2 October 2008, were in relation to the local and regional economic development (LRED) and value chain (VC) initiatives, held under the auspices of the Private Sector Promotion (SMEDSEP) Program of the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

DTI 7 Regional Director Asteria Caberte is satisfied with the SMEDSEP Program, which is aimed at improving territorial and sector competitiveness of local areas especially in the countryside. "In the past" she recounts, "several initiatives such as product development trainings and setting up of a common service facility have been undertaken by the DTI to improve the productivity and profitability of the basket weaving sector in Antequera. They did not work due mainly to the weavers' lack of entrepreneurial skills"

This time, through the Local and Regional Economic Development (LRED) process, all concerned actors were brought to the round table and a common plan was devised to improve the competitiveness of Antequera. These stakeholders meetings gave the weavers golden opportunities to speak out about their plight and the derived plan accounts for their needs and abilities. The Value Chain (VC) approach is a powerful tool to improve the competitiveness of a certain sector (like weaving) and to let producers capture a higher share of the profit.

But not only the weavers have benefited from the implementation of the plan, Asteria Caberte claims: "There was a resurgence of the weaving activity in the area when 33 point 3 Exports Inc. came and offered a huge international market demand for the products from the region" Mr Cruz, the exporter, adds: "With the reduction of layers between the weavers and our firm, the weavers get more cash for their produce and therefore are happier. Just a week after the change, total production outputs rose by 15%. The two weeks that followed saw a 50% and 75% increase in production volume" And the production meets demand too: "They now comprise over 30% of all weavers who supply us", says Mr. Cruz, "The United States takes up 80% of the produce while the remaining 20% is shared by Australia, Europe and Japan These markets look at products for functionality more than for decoration"

For more information on this Success Story, contact:

Mr Lorenzo Templonuevo
Knowledge Management Specialist
lorenzo.templonuevo@gtz.de

Ms Miriam Bacalso
Region VII Coordinator
miriam.bacalso@gtz.de

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Program

PSP Program Office
7F New Solid Building
357 Sen Gil Puyat Avenue
Makati City 1226 PHILIPPINES
+63 2 897 8199, 556 8732, 895 4319
info@smedsep.ph
smedsep.ph

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