

PILI PROJECT: REVITALIZING THE PILI INDUSTRY IN BICOL

An initiative that mobilizes communities and helps farming families improve their pili production.

The Bicol region is known for its pili—a viable commodity that sustains local communities through decades. Pili is considered the “tree of hope” for its resiliency amid natural disasters and its service to the locals for it provides environmental and financial sustainability.

Pili can be processed several ways into different products. Research and development institutions pooled investments to standardize procedures, fabricate machineries, and build facilities that will upscale the region’s pili production. The Socio-Economic Development Program – Multi-Purpose Cooperative (SEDP-MPC), a microfinance nongovernmental organization based in Bicol, has seen the potential of pili to flourish in local and global markets for its versatility.

SEDP-MPC is committed to providing financial and nonfinancial services to microentrepreneurs through training and community mobilization. Its mission is to strengthen local governance, improve the socioeconomic condition, and enhance the spiritual well-being of its stakeholders. An initiative of SEDP-MPC called, “People-Centered Innovation and Livelihood Integration (PILI) Project,” focuses on setting up a facility for pili processing with the support of the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA).



SEDP-MPC runs a Community Store where pili products and other regional commodities are sold.

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SEARCA, through Grants for Research toward Agricultural Innovative Solutions (GRAINS), is one of the funders of the PILI Project. The grant supported the promotion of pili-based livelihoods of farmers and microentrepreneurs in Legazpi and Sorsogon and gave them opportunities to recover, rebuild, and earn more. As a result, SEDP-MPC expanded its novel pili products and conducted training on the pili value chain. GRAINS is known for featuring starter technologies and projects that assist family farmers and farming communities.

MAXIMIZING RESOURCES FROM PILI WASTE TO MARKETABLE PRODUCTS

Pili is a versatile crop—its parts can be transformed into marketable products. Pili kernels are processed into sweet delicacies such as marzipan and candied nuts. Elemi essential oil is harvested from pili tree sap. Pili pulp, often discarded, is filtered and separated to extract its oil, which is then used for cosmetic purposes or as a food condiment. Even pili shells can be made into ornaments.

The PILI Project facilitates these processes by capacitating farmers through training and by providing machinery. It coordinates with different government agencies such as the Department of Agriculture to train farmers on pili processing and marketing. The Pili Hub houses the improvised machines for pili processing and offers other services to assist pili farmers. Pili products and other regional commodities are marketed and sold in the SEDP-MPC Community Store located in Legazpi.

EXPANSION OF NOVEL PRODUCTS AND ORGANIZATION OF FARMER COMMUNITIES

Ms. Remegia Balucio manages the PILI Project. She, together with the project team, organized farmers and micro-entrepreneurs in Albay and Sorsogon to revive their pili-based livelihoods, which are affected by the pandemic and recent typhoons.



The newly-constructed Pili Hub of SEDP-MPC for pili processing, pili storage, and staff office.

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Pili pulp oil products available at the Community Store.

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Ms. Remegia Balucio, the project manager of the PILI Project

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GRAINS helped in setting up the project's groundwork during its initial stage. The grant enabled the project to do test runs of pili oil production and training of farmers. The PILI Project procured a few improvised machines for pili processing, and this has increased their production capacity. To further help farmers, the PILI Project purchases pili drupes from farmers so that during lean months, it can guarantee processors with raw materials despite supply shortages. To ensure the quality of pili drupes, these farmers were taught to properly grow pili seedlings and manage pests and diseases. The PILI Project has created employment for production workers, pickers, traders, and processors. At the same time, it champions the promotion and transfer of knowledge, and access to technology and financial incentives.

“We want to give the pili farmers and micro-entrepreneurs knowledge on planting, pest control management, postharvest, and nursery management,” said Ms. Balucio. “Our initiative aims to raise their awareness of the potential of the pili industry so that they can also invest in their skills and capabilities as pili producers,” she added.

A NEW GENERATION OF PILI PRODUCERS

Ms. Merle Paete is a pili farmer and microentrepreneur in Bacon, Sorsogon. She was awarded as the microentrepreneur of the year by a banking corporation for her exemplary entrepreneurial skills and contribution to the city’s pili industry.

Known as “Nanay Merle” in her community, she has been running a mini grocery store while selling pili drupes and woven mats before venturing into pili pulp oil processing. With her savings, Nanay Merle invested in a three-hectare land to grow pili trees.

Unfortunately, when the pandemic hit, she lost some profit as demand for pili products declined. She was doubtful whether to continue her pili venture or just focus on her store for a stable income. At that time, her son Mr. Edmar Arnaldo was trying to start his own business. Initially, he wanted to do franchising but chose to sell a product that was close to home. Mr. Arnaldo decided to take over Merle's Pili Products.

“I thought it would be a waste to suddenly abandon what we’ve started. I see potential in our pili business so why not give it a second chance”, shared Mr. Arnaldo.





Prepping the pili pulp for manual pressing



The cold-press method for pili pulp oil

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Through the PILI Project's training and seminars, Mr. Arnaldo learned about the cold-press method of pili oil and its value-chain management. With her son's newly found passion for their pili-processing business, Nanay Merle handed over the pili business entirely under his care. Currently, Mr. Arnaldo is developing essential oils with cold-pressed pili oil base. He also plans to add skincare products to their production, but for now, he is determined to improve their essential oils' quality, packaging, and marketing. Mr. Arnaldo values innovation and research in product development. He said that entrepreneurs should learn to constantly study their products and target consumers to come up with out-of-the-box ideas and informed business decisions.

CALL FOR SUPPORT ON AGRICULTURAL MACHINERY AND PILI MARKETING

Innovation is a tedious process; and the PILI Project can attest to it. From building pili-production facilities to marketing products, the project must comply with long procedures and collaborate with other agencies that can provide state-of-the-art equipment or train farmers on product development and marketing.

Fabrication of machines is now the main concern of the project. Ms. Balucio and the rest of the team have actively partnered with a few institutions to develop machines for easier and more efficient pili processing.

Another major challenge for the PILI Project is how to effectively market pili pulp oil. According to Ms. Balucio, the market for pili pulp oil is limited because it is less popular than coconut, sunflower, and olive oil despite all its good qualities.



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The PILI Project aims to target a prospective market for pili pulp oil. However, product analysis, testing, and certification requirements are needed before upscaling the product. So far, the PILI Project has been doing test runs, product analysis, and standardization of procedures.

“There is so much to do and learn. We still need machines specifically designed for pili processing,” Ms. Balucio stated. “We are also seeking product development opportunities for pili pomace and pili pulp oil by-products.”

The PILI Project is willing to accept potential partners who are interested in supporting pili farmers in the region. Planning to scale up its operations this 2023, the project targets to buy more pili drupes from local farmers, produce more pili pulp oil, and develop more pili products. The PILI Project needs further assistance and support to achieve this goal.

“To those willing to extend their help, we [Pili Project] are not the ones who benefit from it, but the pili farmers and microentrepreneurs,” Ms. Balucio said. “The aid goes directly to them. Let us support our pili farmers and microentrepreneurs to sustain and revitalize the pili industry in the Bicol region,” she added.

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LET US
SUPPORT
OUR PILI FARMERS &
MICROENTREPRENEURS
PILI Project