

## Saving the rice heritage: three women setting examples

Three women making a difference in their own way, contributing to sustainably manage and conserve the ancient Ifugao Rice Terraces – an agricultural and cultural heritage while helping to make their living and livelihoods better.



**Julie** is 38 years old and lives with her five children in Lohob, a small farming village in the Julongan barangay of Kiangan, Ifugao, the Philippines.

The village is surrounded by rice terraces where Julie produces a valuable variety of traditional rice adapted to the high altitudes and the corresponding low temperatures of this particular region.

While she is unsure of the exact number of rice paddies she is leasing and cultivating, she does know they do not produce enough rice

to sustain her family until the next harvest. This shortage is partly related to the harsh climate in the Cordilleras; the long cycle of traditional rice that can only be planted and harvested once a year (July to August), and the lease fee that half the yield goes to the owner of the rice field.

While Julie can only feed her family for approximately five months of the year with the rice she grows, she is selling some of it at the market at a higher price because of its scarcity. Julie can then afford to buy lowland rice, which is cheaper since it can be harvested many times a year, to ensure her family has enough to eat year-round.

In addition to rice, Julie produces several types of vegetables, beans, onions, and ginger to feed her family and, if a surplus remains, she sells the vegetables to the vendors at the local market for extra income.

A common dilemma faced by Julie and her neighbours is the possibility of abandoning the traditional organic production of rice and crops and instead taking out a loan from one of many multinational enterprises to buy and use chemical fertilizers that increase production yields. Julie's use of pesticides is sparing, as it is only when pest damage is too much that she decides to treat her crops.

In the last few years the two main pests affecting her farming have been earthworms, which bore holes into the dykes around the fields disrupting water regulation, and the golden apple snail (*Pomacea canalicula*), which devours the rice plants, smaller snail species, fish and frog eggs and different insect species.

To empower farmers and communities, like Julie's, the GIAHS and RRI organizes capacity development trainings to raise awareness of the unique heritage farming systems and the ecosystem goods and services associated to it. Through Farmer Field Schools (FFS), GIAHS and RRI helped improved the livelihood strategies of local farmers through innovation. FFS meetings take place twice a month and involve a selected number of farmers who have been chosen by the local government. Julie doesn't miss any of the sessions and does her best to implement the techniques she learns at the field school in her daily work back home.

With the support from the GIAHS and RRI, Julie has now become a spokeswoman in her community, encouraging neighbours who are not participating in the GIAHS-RRI trainings to look on and apply their innovative cultivation methods, help conserve the traditional rice, and protect the fugaro agriculture and cultural heritage. Julie is only of the Ifugao women farmers empowered. Through GIAHS-RRI, Julie has now become a spokeswoman in her community encouraging neighbours who did not participate in the GIAHS-RRI trainings to look on the overall value of traditional organic rice production, protecting the environment and conserving the ifugao agriculture heritage.

**Maria Galeon** currently lives in Kiangnan Poblacion, Kiangnan town center, but she grew up and raised her six children in a small village in Nagacadan. Before Maria retired, she worked as an elementary school teacher in Hungduan and Nagacadan (both pilot GIAHS-sites). For some years, during her childhood, Maria lived in a traditional girls' dormitory in her community. The young girls were fascinated to hear stories told by the elder women from the village; who taught them about the history of their ancestors and their community.



When Maria tells her stories the listener is plunged into another era. Maybe her life as a teacher, constantly being surrounded by children, has kept her young at heart because, despite her 76 years, she has retained an innovative mind and critical spirit. As an active member of the local farmers' association, Maria is helping her community develop.

Today, Maria is one of forty-seven GIAHS tour guides who have been accredited by the local tourism council after participating in a five-day training and workshop evaluation. She offers her knowledge and experience to foreign tourists interested in her culture, traditions, and way of life because she is convinced this will help her community move into the future. Maria is not worried that tourists taking pictures and walking through rice fields will bother the local farmers, her main concern is that expanding tourism may cause possible loss of values.

*“We, the older people here in Nagacadan, fear that too much tourism will provoke a change of values in the community”, Maria shared.*

Local farmers’ deeply rooted hospitality can easily switch to that of competitive business spirit. Without price regulation for traditional goods, there may be under and overbidding between farmers, which may affect all involved. Another issue is that children are being taken out of school to work in tourism. This has been observed in other tourist destinations in the Philippines.

To tackle these issues, the GIAHS and RRI Initiative, is collaborating with the local tourism council. Together they are working to establish tourism guidelines to ensure this sector develops smoothly and sustainably. Competition will be supplanted by a system based on sharing that is mutually beneficial to the community.

With community-based activities, such as the establishment of a community-based Open Air Museum, GIAHS focuses not only on the promotion of tourism but also on transferring the benefits to the local population. Besides the tour guides, GIAHS-RRI is collaborating with the local tourism council to train all actors directly or indirectly involved with the tourism sector.



Tricycle drivers prepare for the arrival of tourists in Kiangan.

An example is the tricycle drivers, who are among the first people arriving tourists meet.

They have been trained by local historians about the history of Kiangan and Ifugao, which they share with their passengers. The same training is organized for owners of bed and breakfasts, massage-groups and community store-owners.

GIAHS-RRI has helped strengthen the institutional and social structures necessary to sustainably entrench Agro-Eco-Tourism within the community. Today, with this enhanced capacity for tourism, the town is ready to receive increasing numbers of arriving tourists and the economic and social benefits they will bring to the community.

**Rowena** lives in Hapao, a town in the municipality of Hungduan. The rice fields of Hapao are surrounded by high mountains resulting in limited access to the Barangay from outside; together with the road construction that slows traffic, people do not leave Hapao very often. Rowena owns a rice farm in Hapao where she and her children used to live; this is now rented as they decided to move to Manila and run a local bakery instead. Although she does not depend on the yearly yield of the harvested rice, she still works in the fields during the work-intensive periods of the year to support her neighbours and family.

She cares about her community and the challenges they all face. Like her own children, many others leave the community for work, studies or simply in search of the more comfortable life that can be offered by the larger cities. “They are looking for jobs in offices, instead of breaking their backs in the rice fields,” Explains Rowena. The main problem is who is left to cultivate the rice, restore the walls over and over again and remove the weeds, once Rowena’s generation is gone? Workers per unit area have decreased alarmingly over the past 10 years. Many farmers use chemical pesticides and fertilizers to increase their yield and offset labour shortages – but by doing this, the farmers are slowly destroying the ecosystems they depend upon.

All these changes are accompanied by a more dangerous factor: the loss of knowledge. Once the traditional living knowledge is gone, this extraordinary land management system of the Ifugao rice terraces will become a slowly eroding dead façade. For Rowena, who has lived her whole life as a rice farmer, there is still hope. Determined to halt the loss of the traditional organic practices of rice cropping and the corresponding ceremonials and rituals, Rowena has decided to share this knowledge with the younger members of her community.



*Rowena (wearing green shirt)*





Rowena's old farmhouse – the  
Agricultural Heritage Learning Centre

The establishment of an Agricultural Heritage Learning Centre that focuses on organic farming, one of the GIAHS-RRI Initiative's activities, serves as an ideal platform for promoting traditional knowledge. Rowena has offered her old farmhouse, in the middle of the rice fields, for use as the Agricultural Heritage Learning Centre. This location offers plenty of possibilities for practical training and visual instruction. This will ensure that the knowledge transferred and exchanged is applicable to the farmers' living environment. GIAHS supports Rowena by organizing meetings and training sessions where other knowledge holders are invited to share their experiences. The GIAHS Learning Centre also serves as the contact point for farmers who need assistance and monitoring support in specific activities.

The conventional knowledge-transfer from parents to children is thereby replaced by a knowledge-transfer from the older community members to the interested young ones, who have decided to stay in the region. All involved farmers are from the same community, facilitating the exchange and acceptance of ideas and ensuring that traditional approved technologies are revitalized – thus providing a better chance for traditional practices to be passed from present to future generations successfully.

*Credits: Photo and Text by Lena Gubler, edited by Jane Ramos dela Cruz, NRL Technical officer*