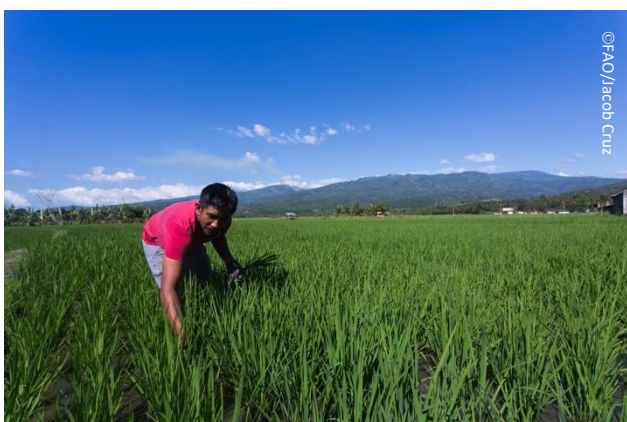




Mixing tradition and new learning in farming

*Interview with Sandy Obsioma
Rice farmer, Province of Misamis Oriental, Philippines*

Sandy Obsioma is a young farmer who welcomes the use of new technologies and combines these with more traditional farming methods. He sees the positive potential of the Farmer Field School and how this approach could turn farmer groups in their municipality into entrepreneurs.



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An ordinary day at the farm for Sandy Obsioma – clear blue skies and fresh morning air held a promise of good harvest.

Sandy Obsioma, like many of the younger farmers in Barangay Dumarait, in the Municipality of Balingasag in the Province of Misamis Oriental, learned his farming methods from the “old folks” who have depended on many traditional and, oftentimes, superstitious and inappropriate farming practices. In following traditional practices, Sandy thought that planting was all about putting as many seedlings on soil and increasing the amount of pesticides.

“Retailers would sell me various types of pesticides. I would buy four to five of them and mix them all together like a cocktail before applying them to my field.” This practice is not unusual to many farmers in the country. Cocoy Liamera, an agricultural technologist at Balingasag, admits that farmers who want to increase produce think that getting rid of pests by maximizing the use of fertilizer will improve yield and guarantee a perfect crop.

When the *Sustainable Intensification of Rice Production (SIRP)* was introduced in the Municipality of Balingasag, through the FAO’s Farmer Field Schools in Save and Grow (FFS-S&G) program, farmers were excited – but at the same time hesitant to practice new methods. The program aimed to improve rice productivity by introducing farming methods that are natural, sustainable and not harmful to the environment.

In the beginning it was not easy to convince farmers to adopt new methods. “According to them, *to see is to believe*. As they were already earning from their current practices, they couldn’t see any reason to spend more time learning new ways. It was necessary to show them examples, so they could see the benefits for themselves,” Cocoy said.

The FFS adopted a participatory, experiential and discovery-based approach where farmers observed and experienced good farming practices such as seeding rates, planting distances, fertilizer management, water management, pest management, and vegetables farming systems.

Over time, the new methods proved to be more sustainable and profitable. In the old method farmers would spend around 5,000 to 10,000 pesos per hectare for fertilizers alone. Adopting the new approach drove costs down to an average of only 6,000 pesos per hectare.



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The vegetable farm is abundant with new sprouts. Produce from the farm adds to the daily diet of the farmers and their households.



To control pests, without the use of chemicals, biological agents were introduced. “There are good insects and bad insects. Good insects should not be killed because they help us in the growth of our crops. We just need to know how to identify them,” Sandy said.



Harvest is good this year.

Farmer Rudy Daham is one of the more elderly farmers in Barangay Dumarait. He admitted being a bit skeptical at the start of the FFS-Save and Grow training. Having been a farmer for more than four decades, he had relied solely on counting the moon cycles before he would apply his fertilizers and decide when to plant.

In fact, Rudy was one of the first to use natural pest control methods in his community. “It was the only way to learn. One must surrender to learning because it’s the only way to keep an open mind,” he said.



“Burnay”, a type of edible snail, is collected from the pond. This is eaten by boiling with coconut milk and adding spices.

“In the past they would practice monocropping and only planted rice,” adds Cocoy. Four or five months in a year, there would be nothing to harvest because they were only planting rice.

Today, farmers enjoy a rich variety of vegetables, fresh from their own backyard. Sandy says, “We also learned how to properly plant vegetables. Planting vegetables helps us earn additional income. We can tend to the vegetables while working in the rice fields.”

Through the efforts of the local government and the support of their local barangay officials, Balingasag



Res (center) is one of the young farmers from Balingasag who leads field discussions.

farmers have become more confident that the methods and knowledge shared by the FFS-Save and Grow will bring even better yields in the future as they continue teaching other farmers what they learned from the program.

The local government has had a vital role to play in the reach of this program. The appointment of a dedicated agriculturist to do field visits and implement the program to its full extent is important to the farmers.

Cocoy relates, “A very small number of our participants are college graduates or have taken courses. Many have only reached elementary schooling. It is important that the teaching should not only cover theories but should also be hands-on so the farmers are able to retain what they learned.” The old method came face to face with the new – and the farmers themselves saw the results.

When asked what he dreams for the farmers in his community, Sandy says with a glimmer of hope that little by little when they can balance their profit, he hopes that later, farmers can become self-made entrepreneurs.

