

Australian-educated Agusanons help transform Agusan del Sur through agriculture program



PAHRODF

Philippines Australia
Human Resource and
Organisational Development
Facility

As Agusan del Sur moves out from the list of top 16 poorest provinces in the Philippines, Australian-educated Agusanons work behind the scenes through USAD, an agriculture program that alleviates poverty in the province.

Linda Buquir, an Australia Awards alumna, currently spends about 60-80% of her time working with teams who does site validation, site development, and site monitoring of Agusan del Sur's upland municipalities and barangays where poverty incidence is high. She is, after all, the overall team leader of the province's banner program called the Upland Sustainable Agri-Forestry Development or USAD, an innovative intervention of the local government to alleviate poverty in Agusan del Sur.

Launched in 2011, USAD works by providing rubber seedlings to farmers in the upland areas. In seven years, an Agusanon farmer who plants rubber seedlings in one hectare of land may reap an annual salary of Php144,000 from his harvest; an annual gross higher than the salary of a casual employee in the capitol. Because it usually takes 5 to 7 years to harvest rubber, USAD also provides farmers with short-term crops—fruit trees, upland rice, and vegetables—for their source of income while waiting for the rubber's harvest season.

"The lives of Agusanons will really be uplifted because of the program. If, in the past, our people can only eat twice a day, now their lives will be better because of this intervention. According to our Governor, with this program, we can really see improvement in the lives of our people"

CASE STUDY

LINDA BUQUIR

Provincial Government of Agusan del Sur

Graduate Diploma in Property
University of South Australia



Australian-educated Agusanons help transform Agusan del Sur through agriculture program

“The lives of Agusanons will really be uplifted because of the program. If, in the past, our people can only eat twice a day, now their lives will be better because of this intervention. According to our Governor, with this program, we can really see improvement in the lives of our people,” said Linda.

Linda, who is a provincial assessor, was initially surprised when Governor Adolph Plaza tapped her to lead USAD despite her lack of background in agriculture. But she realised later on that her leadership and management skills and her competencies in real property valuation, which she developed in Australia, would be assets valuable to the program.

In 2009 Linda took up Graduate Diploma in Property at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. When Linda came back to Agusan del Sur, she transformed the provincial assessors’ office: “When I came back we were just targeting around 60 million of real property tax. Now, because I applied my learnings in Australia and saw an opportunity to upgrade our province’s real property market value, we are already targeting 122 million. Last year, our treasurer reported that for the first time in history, our collection went up to 101 million.”

Accordingly, the additional revenue generated by the local government went to the province’s special education fund, which is allocated for the honorarium of the province’s volunteer teachers. Under Linda’s leadership, the Provincial Assessor’s office was awarded the Ulirang Tanggapan (Model Agency) of Agusan del Sur in 2011 and 2012.

The culture that our scholars acquired from Australia – being a critical thinker, monitoring program outcomes and sustainability – is different from what we’ve been used to.

Linda is currently applying these same set of skills to USAD: “I imparted to them the importance of having all taxes declared. In the past, we have an agriculture program like this [USAD], though it was not a banner program at that time. Back then, when we gave out seedlings, we did not consider the corresponding real property; we did not ask the farmers for tax declaration of their land, which is the basis for paying real property tax,” said Linda.

Australian-educated Agusanons help transform Agusan del Sur through agriculture program

Linda is just one of the scholars who is making a difference through USAD. Aside from Linda, 8-10 more Australia Awards alumni comprise the bulk of USAD manpower. “Most of the people who were tapped to join USAD were really scholars. Perhaps our Governor saw our acquired competencies from Australia in terms of running projects. Now that USAD is on its expansion phase, we formed 6 teams and you can see that there is always a scholar per team. In fact, two scholars were even assigned to become team leaders, while I am the overall team leader,” said Linda.

Thanks to my Australian education, I am able to better articulate what needs to be done in my work, in our projects; and I am able to help improve the project methodology of agri-based projects in Agusan.”

Mr. Ronulfo Rivera Paler, provincial environment and natural resources officer and USAD team coordinator, affirmed this: “The culture that our scholars acquired from Australia – being a critical thinker, monitoring program outcomes and sustainability – is different from what we’ve been used to. So what we did was organise second liners who will implement USAD in the upland areas, and ensure that each team has at least one scholar.”

One of the scholars tapped to become a team leader is Oscar Jurado, a technical staff of the province’s agricultural engineering division, who took up Master of Project Management in Queensland University of Technology in 2011. During the conceptualisation stage of USAD, Oscar volunteered to design the structure of USAD’s pilot run.

“When I heard that they were working on the project proposal for USAD, I volunteered to develop the project structure because I saw an opportunity to apply what I have learned in Australia in terms of project management. So I designed the system and guidelines for the pilot implementation, and pitched it to the department heads. When they saw my idea, they liked it, and that’s how I got involved in the project,” said Oscar.

Australian-educated Agusanons help transform Agusan del Sur through agriculture program

Oscar added: “It’s fulfilling because I am able to help my fellow Agusanons. Thanks to my Australian education, I am able to better articulate what needs to be done in my work, in our projects; and I am able to help improve the project methodology of agri-based projects in Agusan.”

“I am fulfilled because I feel that I am a frontrunner of change in my organisation. Studying in Australia has been a really big help because it changes your perspective.”

USAD is just one of the interventions uplifting the economic condition of Agusanons especially those in the upland areas. Through the local government’s innovative development plans and programs, the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB) reported in 2013 that Agusan del Sur’s poverty incidence rate dropped from 51.3 percent in 2009 to 38.6 percent in 2012. This improvement enabled the province to move out from the list of the top 16 poorest provinces in the country, where it ranked 9th in 2006 and 3rd in 2009.

According to Mr. Ronulfo Rivera Paler, the goal of the local government is to further reduce poverty incidence from 38.6% to 12.3%. USAD, as the province’s current banner program, is expected to break new grounds in supporting the province’s development goals.

Linda Buquir, believing in the value of the project, gamely accepted the challenge of leading her team in achieving USAD’s objectives: “Even if we have a lot of workload, it is very fulfilling because we are inspired to help our province and fellow Agusanons. I am fulfilled because I feel that I am a frontrunner of change in my organisation. Studying in Australia has been a really big help because it changes your perspective. When you go home, the desire of your heart is to help your province because you’ve seen so many beautiful things in the other country that you want to apply in your province.”