

Academic and technology integration – educational program (ATI-EP) for out-of-school-youths (OSY) in conflict and rural areas of the Philippines

Asterio Saliot¹ & Renelle Joy Tabinas²

¹ Xevera Subd., Bacolor, Pampanga 2001

² Farmers' Village, VSU, Baybay, Leyte 6521
Email: apsaliot@ymail.com

Abstract. Educating the decreasing number of youth interested in agriculture is one challenge addressed by the Philippines' agricultural extension services. In order to reach out to the new generation of food producers and arouse their interest in farming, the Agricultural Training Institute came up with the Academic and Technology Integration – Educational Program (ATI-EP). The program extends agricultural education to young members of underprivileged rural communities who unfortunately lack resources to go to school. Students in the program are exposed to both academic and technical aspects of farming. The two-track learning system combining formal and non-formal education aims to accelerate the grade level of the OSY appropriate to their age and enable them to obtain national competency certificates on organic agriculture production. The learnings gained from the implementation include success and failures that are leading to new approaches in the delivery of extension education services, particularly to rural youth who are the new breed of agriculture entrepreneurs.

Keywords: agriculture, extension, education, training, farming, out-of-school-youth.

Introduction

A decreasing number of farmers and students interested in agriculture is being continuously observed in the rural Philippines. With the average age of Filipino farmers at 57 years old, it is appropriate to build competencies and arouse enthusiasm in developing a new breed of farmers.

The idea of an agricultural education extension program for out-of-school-youths (OSYs) started when watching native children of the Manobo Tribe in Southern Mindanao, who were walking barefoot for around 6 km just to reach the nearest primary school. The idea was 'to bring the school to the children' particularly the Indigenous People (IP) who are living in far flung areas, street children, and sons and daughters of rebel returnees in the conflict communities of Southern Philippines (Saliot 2014).

The optimism of bringing education to the native children paved the way for the concept of a mixed education learning system which combined formal and non-formal education, focusing on farming. 'Preparing the youth as a new breed of competent farmers of the next generation' was another goal of the program initiator. Saliot saw the need for a learning system that provides basic education and training on farming to those interested youths who have little formal education.

Since academic knowledge by itself is not enough, an integrated dual training system that focuses not only on agriculture technologies and academic aspects of farming, but also on preserving the culture while venturing into farm businesses, was developed. Agriculture entrepreneurship was incorporated into the program to encourage the development of skilful and knowledgeable entrepreneurial farmers in the country. This integrating course provides hands-on experiences to OSYs and IPs for them to appreciate farming and to show them that there is money in agriculture.

To develop the potentials and capabilities of OSYs, the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) started a partnership with a private school, ACES Polytechnic College, which is also an accredited Extension Service Provider (ESP) of the ATI. On April 28, 2015, 160 OSYs selected as scholars from different regions across the middle (Visayas Islands) and southern part (Mindanao) of the Philippines gathered in ACES to be educated and to harness their inclinations towards agriculture. The Academic and Technology Integration – Educational Program (ATI-EP) is a step for the children to enhance and develop skills, acquire certifications, and to improve their lives in the future as agriculture entrepreneurs. These agri-entrepreneurs will be the new breed of farmers who will help in making jobs and producing food on the farms.

The Agriculture and Technology Integration – Educational Program

ATI-EP as a two-track learning system involves the integration of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) of the Department of Education and the National Competency Certification of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA).

The formal or academic aspect includes reading, writing, arithmetic, health and science as part of the ALS of the Department of Education. On the other hand, the non-formal aspect focuses on technology and skills training in agriculture. The curriculum which is based on the National Competency Certification of TESDA uses the Philippine Farmers Qualification Framework.

Agricultural training or technical modules taught to the students were on livestock raising, feed formulation, vermiculture, animal husbandry, agricultural crop and organic agriculture production, farm business and entrepreneurship, food and meat processing and also farm machinery operation and repair, amongst others. Additionally, values education, sports education, culture appreciation and enhancement were taught to the scholars of the program.

The OSYs were aged 13-23 years and went through the activities for a period of six months using the 70:30 scheme. Seventy percent (70%) of the activities are devoted to hands-on training on the farm, while 30% were for lectures which also incorporate traditional dances and customs. Learners were grouped based on a Literacy Test (Pre-Test) into one of four streams: basic literary, lower elementary, advanced elementary or secondary learners.

Scholars of the first batch of the program were composed of Muslims, Christians, Waray, Bisaya and a few Indigenous People from the various tribes in Mindanao. Upon finishing the program, the students were expected to obtain a Diploma corresponding to their appropriate educational level and an NCII certificate on the 5 competencies for organic agriculture production. Each group or region was assigned their own piggy banks that were filled by visitors to the farm or from their own savings and earnings as a group. The scholars also served as tour guides for visitors to the site.

The morning routines of the scholars first focused on practical aspects of farming. They were trained to wake up early like the farmers and were assigned to complete farm tasks by group usually at 5:30am-7am and 3:30pm-5:00pm. This was followed by lectures in the classroom from 10am-12noon and at 1:30pm-3:30pm. Depending on their scheduled chore for the month, each group may: feed farm animals such as turkeys, pigs, and chickens; formulate feeds; mix potting media; or clean farm surroundings, for the first three months. Each group was also assigned to take care of a fish cage assigned to them. The succeeding three months of their stay included harvesting and processing techniques.

Despite time spent learning academic subjects and agricultural technologies, students were not deprived of their childhood, as they were able to play basketball and undertake other fun activities during their free time. Religious endeavours were observed and respected as well. Moreover, those who wanted to earn were given the chance to work on the farm on weekends.

The youths were given options whether to have a break after their three months stay or to work on the farm to earn extra income before beginning the second half of the program. They were also prepared for the Organic Agriculture Production assessment. The assessment determines whether or not they will obtain their National Competency Certificates.

Examples of students taking part in the ATI-EP program

Ethel Wolda: a striving young woman from the conflict zone of Basilan

Ethel Wolda Guerrero hails from the war zone Basilan, home of the Abu Sayyaf rebel group. She was 22 years old upon joining the ATI-EP. Ethel shared her experiences, highlighting the difference of organic farming compared to using chemicals that eventually cause depletion of soil nutrients. Through the training she learned how to raise cows, how to grow crops properly, and had plans of having her own lot where she will apply the organic principles she learned.

Ethel, being the eldest and most mature student in her batch, was elected as the class president. She carried the responsibility of looking after her co-scholars and was also teaching those who were behind in the lessons. However, she found it difficult to manage some youths belonging to other regions and religion.

Ethel mentions that the program has given opportunity to kids doing nothing to be able to have their own dreams in life and to change their current situation, including that of their parents. She was thankful for the opportunity which served as a step to achieve her aspirations. Her message to fellow out-of-school-youths was not to give up as there are many ways to gain knowledge. She also encouraged them to find work or even experiment in their backyards through gardening. Ethel observed during her stay that many students, though all came from different communities or localities, were able to get along in the long run. However, she noticed that others got homesick, and hoped that the school could be near the respective homes or areas of the participants. According to her, most students were motivated to work on the farm as a sideline for them to have extra money to deposit in their piggy banks.

During the graduation ceremony, Ethel became one of the top three students of her batch. She delivered her testimonial speech stating that although they were far from their families for months, they were able to stand on their own, pursue their dreams and learn many things along the way. At times, there were misunderstandings among the group but these were resolved leaving them more united. Their stay had been very meaningful though there were tiring times as they worked in the field.

Ethel and her fellow batchmates were deeply grateful and proud to tell their parents that they had graduated and finished studies. They were thankful for the support, for the acceptance, for the way they were treated as a family, and for the trust of the program in each of them. 'I am very proud to be a scholar and a product of the ATI-EP' (E Wolda 2015, pers.comm.). Ethel assured the management that she won't ever forget all the learnings and memories they had during the six months training.

Today, Ethel works as an employee of the ACES Farm.

Jenny: an out-of-school-girl turned agriculture technician

Jenny Lyn Obsanga (Plate 1), an out-of-school-youth who is now working in the Municipal Agriculture Office in her province after graduating from the ATI-EP program said:

I want to thank ATI, Dr. Eden Bautista, Ma'am Sol and most especially to Director Saliot for they were the people behind this Academic and Technology Integration Education Program for Out-of-School-Youths that helped me gain knowledge and expertise in organic agriculture. Through this, I was able to acquire and passed the NC II for Organic Agriculture while I was at ACES Polytechnic College. Though I only finished second year high school, I am now employed as a contractual Agricultural Technician at the Municipal Agriculture Office here in our Municipality of Culasi, Province of Antique. Thank you very much ATI.

Plate 2. Jenny Lyn Obsanga



Source: ATI-Regional Training Centre 6

Other scholars of the program were from the tribes of Mindanao and sons and daughters of rebel returnees (Plates 2 & 3) who have been deprived of education due to the armed conflict in their area.

Assessing the ATI-EP

Lessons learned from the pilot batch

Among the 160 students who participated at the beginning of the program, 132 were able to graduate, and obtained a diploma as well as national competency certificates. Nonetheless, during the course of the program, some situations occurred that affected the number of participating students. These were the following:

- medical issues, such as leukemia, Urinary Tract Infection, ulcer, depression, and vertigo
- loner, not wanting to participate in the activities
- unruly youths who were chasing and threatening women and challenging officials and co-trainees
- running away
- bullying.

Plate 2. James Dongogon, a native of the Manoba Tribe

Source: Renelle Joy Tabinas

Plate 3. Children of former rebel leaders with the ATI-EP initiator

Source: Renelle Joy Tabinas

These cases were responded to and dealt with immediately. With the incidents that arose, a need for stringent selection of participants for the next batch was recommended after the initial assessment. Interested ATI-EP scholars should be:

- healthy, free from any physical deformities and drug-related experiences
- able to communicate in Filipino or English aside from their dialects
- at least functionally literate
- willing to undergo three months training away from home
- certified by the Barangay Captain or School Principal to be of good moral character.

With the varying culture, religion, age gap and tribal customs of youths coming from the different islands, it was decided that the participating youths for the succeeding batches will not be taken too far away from their families. Each training centre of the ATI capable of handling the program can connect with the local agencies in charge of the ALS and TESDA competency assessment so they can cater for youths in their respective regional area. To prevent cases of bullying, youths will be grouped according to a definite age bracket.

Practical innovations: ATI-EP now

Currently, the ATI-EP is being operated under a differing network of training centres of the ATI. Some training centres were able to launch the following year in their respective local areas. The program is being attended by OSYs from the nearby provinces within the coverage of ATI's training centres. The program works in direct collaboration with the local representatives of the Department of Education-ALS and TESDA.

Depending on the locality and the needs of the youths, the program has been contextualised to fit their specific needs, taking into consideration religion, age, and medical history, among others. Still, the major integration of formal and non-formal education, or the academic plus the

technical aspect, is being followed. Also, the 70:30 ratio for the hands-on and lecture scheme remains.

For some areas, the first three months include lectures from the ALS Coordinators and ATI Technical Staff in the centre. Hands-on activities in farming are also being conducted in ATI Centres' Learning Sites while the other half (three months) is devoted to practical interaction and experiential learning with the farmer teachers. In this manner, youths are deployed in certified farm sites of the ATI for their practical experience where they can learn straight from the farmer practitioners themselves.

Conclusion

Bringing the farming school to children in far-flung areas is possible in certain parts of the Philippines. However, there are constraints and limitations such as security, medical history, or proximity to family that the youths and the implementing agency encountered.

These were resolved and responded to without steering away from the purpose of the program: that is, to provide both formal and non-formal education to underprivileged youths in rural Philippines. The academic part of the program involves reading, writing and arithmetic as part of the Alternative Learning System, while the technical aspects include building skills in organic farming, farm business, and other agricultural technologies. Other than that, the modules of the program are infused with topics on cultural preservation or enhancement as well as values formation.

With the integrated courses, 70:30 scheme, hands-on exercises on the farm and actual experience of the youths in farming, it is envisioned that a new breed of competent farmers or agriculture entrepreneurs, having realised there is money in farming, will be encouraged to till the land. The two-track learning system of the ATI-EP is an avenue that allows out-of-school-youths to become holders of national competency certificates and diplomas, thereby increasing their exposure to opportunities in the agriculture sector and making them potential agri-entrepreneurs who will soon take the place or help the ageing Filipino farmers in securing food for all.

Reference

Saliot, AP 2014, 'Building Farmers' Assets and Investing in the Out-of-School Youths for Development', unpublished report.