Women-led Community-based Plastic Recycling in Metro Manila, Philippines: A Case Study of KILUS Multi-purpose Cooperative

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1. Background

Municipal solid waste (MSW) management in Metro Manila is usually associated with local initiatives such as community-based recycling and composting, albeit, not yet on a metro-wide scale. The rising cost of fuel and commodities nowadays and even in the past have made recycling a good source of livelihood for the unemployed and underemployed in the Metropolis. Results from the January 2008 Labor Force Survey of the national government showed that unemployment rate in Metro Manila is now 12.5%, the highest among the sixteen (16) regions in the Philippines. In comparison, the nationwide unemployment rate is 7.4%. Aside from the economic gains that people get from recycling, it has become a source of social unity with the formation of cooperatives and people’s organizations whose goal is collective or participatory waste management.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) commissioned a study in 2003 to assess the overall solid waste management situation in Metro Manila. One of the outputs was an assessment of community-based recycling practices. The report revealed that there are usually two types of community-based solid waste management (CBSWM) activities like recycling and reuse of non-biodegradable materials and composting. The livelihood component is in the form of vegetable gardening and handicraft-making. However, what was remarkable with the findings was that CBSWM is being done regardless of the social status of the community be it lower, middle or upper class. The report says that there are sixteen (16) major local recycling initiatives in the Metropolis, whose activities range from collection of recyclable materials, composting and gardening. Non-government organizations (NGOs) and local governments play an important role in these endeavors.

One of the local recycling projects which merits thorough research is the case of a women-led organization called Kababaihang Isa and Layunin Umunlad and Sambayanan or KILUS. It means “Women with a Vision to Improve Society.” It is seen as one of the most successful recycling projects in Metro Manila providing employment to at least 150 women. This paper will discuss KILUS in details.

2. History of KILUS

KILUS has a colorful history. Prior to its current name, it was originally called Samahan ng mga Kababaihan ng Ugong or Organization of Women in Ugong. Ugong is the name of the Barangay (smallest political unit in the Philippines) where said organization operates. It is located in Pasig

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City, which is one of the 17 cities/municipalities in Metro Manila. It was formed in August 1997 by a barangay leader to help in the clean and green program. It was formally registered with the government as a foundation in 1999. Current membership is around 500 women. Its first project was “Bawas basura, dagdag kita” or “Reduce waste, earn money.” It gave Barangay Ugong the award as the Cleanest Barangay in Pasig City. Its main role was helping the local government encourage household waste segregation and reduction.

In the course of its campaign, it came across a doy pack which is a popular plastic material used as a packaging material for juices. It is commonly sold in schools and in restaurants. With technical training provided by the government, it experimented on making handicrafts e.g. bags from doy packs. The rest is history as KILUS is now exporting beautiful handicrafts to several countries.

3. Recycling Processes

There are twelve (12) major steps in converting doy packs into handicrafts. First step is collecting and buying doy packs from schools, factories, funeral parlors and other establishments. A used doy pack is bought at P0.10 centavos/piece or Y0.25 Japanese yen. Factory rejects are also bought at P8.00/kilo or Y20 Japanese yen. The last step of the process is packaging and shipment to its international customers. Quality control is an important process to ensure that products are up to standards set by the Cooperative. KILUS produces four (4) products such as bags, home furnishings, fashion accessories and footwear. In terms of markets, 90% of its products are sold abroad notably in Japan, Canada, France, Germany, Los Angeles and Hawaii. Sixty percent (60%) are shipped to London where buyers abound.

4. Income

There is indeed money from recycling doy packs. The figure below shows the annual sales of KILUS for the period 2002-2007:

![Figure 1. KILUS Income](image)

Starting in 2002, sales grew up until 2004 with gross revenue of P5 million pesos or about Y2.5 million yen. In 2007, sales were slightly lower than in 2004. Sixty percent (60%) of products sold are usually bags while the rest are weaved products. Mode of shipment is by air and sea depending on the requirement of the buyers.
5. Workforce of KILUS

Behind the success of KILUS is its labor force, which is mostly composed of women. It employs about 500 workers who are either based in their main project office or home-based. Project-based workers are those who make the final components of accessories while home-based are those who wash doy packs and make strips. They are paid a piece and deadlines are set as to when they need to deliver their outputs. There is no age limit for the workers as long one is able to do the work. Salaries are competitive, too, compared with other jobs in Metro Manila as shown in the above table.

Aside from the additional dividends and patronage refunds received by members, they are also given non-monetary benefits like monthly supply of rice, health insurance, and grocery items. KILUS also sends selected children of the workers to school. There is no hierarchy within the Foundation such that an ordinary worker can directly talk to the Managers when the need arises. “Good governance” is what KILUS Management aims to achieve.

6. Vision

In an interview, the workers aspire to make KILUS known worldwide and they hope that what it does will be replicated in other communities. The KILUS managers, on the other hand, articulated some needs like skills training, technology and design development to cope with the dynamic taste of its customers. They are looking for local and international markets as well.

7. Conclusions

The case of KILUS highlights the importance of livelihood component in a recycling-oriented economy. It points to two things: economic and social benefits. The role of the big business sector is important but it is essential to first look at what local communities can creatively do with recyclable materials. After all, community consciousness is the most important aspect in municipal solid waste management. The community spirit of looking for local solutions to local problems will take care of higher level of recycling in the context of the Philippines.

Reference:

Focus group discussion with selected KILUS workers, Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines, February 22, 2008.