



HOPE FROM COCO HUSKS

Practically everywhere in Bicol, endless rows of coconut trees seem to dominate the landscape. Some TSPI clients are seizing opportunities from this abundance to help transform once-sleepy communities into thriving areas of business.

From the upland town of Manito in southeastern Albay, the Mayon Volcano towers above Legazpi City and the serene gulf. The view is one-of-a-kind, but some barangays, like Cabacongan, suffer from a chronic lack of job opportunities aside from copra production and soft broom making.

"If you'd go around here before, you would see a lot of people just hanging around, doing nothing," said Nanay Ana Maria Nibreja, a mother of four and a TSPI client since 2013. "The people aren't really lazy. They just didn't have the means to make better use of their time."

In 2013, TSPI approached Nanay Ana and other mothers for a possible livelihood opportunity in partnership with a local enterprise called Juboken. There is great demand for a product called coco geonet, a biodegradable and organic material that is draped over swathes of land to control soil erosion.

Twenty-five TSPI clients, including Nanay Ana, underwent Juboken's training on coco geonet production in July 2013. TSPI extended them an ₱11,800 loan to buy twining and weaving machines. The impact on the community was immediate, said Nanay Ana.

"Every day, at around 3 to 4 o'clock, when you walk around the barangay, the streets are filled with people who are twining. It's instant money for their daily needs," she added.

After the group paid off its loan, Nanay Ana decided to become an entrepreneur. Today, she has 32 twining and four weaving machines, producing up to 10 coco geonets a week. Dozens of families rely on her enterprise.

In nearby Barangay Manumbalay, Nanay Tess Lladone, a mother of six, is also a twining "convert."

"When my husband died, I didn't know what to do financially," she said. The single mother, who used to rely on her husband's pension and a small coconut farm, now employs 42 twiners and six weavers, producing up to 30 pieces of geonets a month. "The lives of the people here have really changed. It's very rare to find anyone who just sits around doing nothing."

While living several towns apart, Nanay Liza Bermundo from Bacacay shares the two mothers' fate. At the back of her house are two weaving machines that overflow with heaps of fiber ready for twining.

Right from the start, Nanay Liza's outlook in business has gone beyond her own family. "TSPI trusted me because they saw the potential help that this will bring to the community. It gave jobs to many people in the barangay. My goal has always been to enable other families to experience what we have," she said.