Press Release

Why Balik Binhi Program is a proactive climate response

By Bicol Umalohokan

October is Peasant Month. What better way of featuring farmers' stories than their solutions to challenges that affect them the most, right?

So, let's talk about the Balik Binhi Program, a seed distribution program of Tarabangan sa Bicol, Incorporated (TABI) which is a trial/research farm in Imalnod, Legazpi City.

Tom Borjal, TABI's coordinator for climate resilience program, said in a field interview that in its early years it was a community formed to provide relief aids to disaster-affected farmers.

"However with typhoons getting more destructive, we realized that rehabilitation isn't enough," Borjal said.

Eventually, it evolved into what it is now: a trial/research farm.

What happens in the trial farm?

"In this trial farm, we test traditional rice varieties. The ten most resilient are picked and recommended to participating farmers," said Ronald Labrador. Then, farmers identify which is best suited for their farming areas through a verification process.

According to Labrador, who has a degree in environmental science and is part of the team of farmers that is in charge of the program, the farm got 90 traditional rice varieties from MASIPAG which is a farmer-led network of thousands of farmers in the Philippines.

As one of MASIPAG's trial farms in the country, its method for agricultural diversification is farmer-led and the mode of knowledge and training diffusion is farmer-to-farmer. This makes co-creation of knowledge and cooperation central to the approach.

Why start with seeds for innovation?

Labrador said that if the government wants to reach the smallholder farmers, it should start with seed distribution. "They should allow farmers to propagate their own seeds into resilient crops by letting them have the control of their food production."

To make that happen, farmers should not be dependent on external farm inputs such as seeds and fertilizers.

The trial farm uses natural fertilizers, from fermented microorganisms that are found in the farm's soil, to snail shells, and other organic materials found around the farm.

The seeds are also accessible to members, so long as they share a portion of their harvest for seed storage that will be used for testing and distributing. Farmers (as adaptors) may try to plant just a portion of their rice field(s) when they're just starting out. They can also choose to breed their crops naturally, like what Pepito Babasa did.

Babasa's rice variety is preferred by many MASIPAG farmers because it can withstand flooding, according to regional coordinator Maria Rowena Buena. In a phone interview, Babasa said that his rice field is next to Bato Lake in Camarines Sur which floods his farm when it overflows.

In February 2021, the trial farm was flooded due to typhoon Auring's heavy rainfall. Five of the rice varieties grown survived, while the others didn't. According to Labrador, those that survived are among the proven and tested to be resilient and have been part of the farm's mass production.

Labrador said that the immediate benefit of this method is that farmers save on farming costs which they can use for other family expenses. Moreover, it prevents farmers from getting burdened by debts just to buy chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Their produce, which are mostly for food consumption, are also not exposed to chemical fertilizers. During the pandemic, some of the harvests from the trial farm were set aside for the 'Mobile Hot Meals,' a feeding activity of one of TABI Farm's partner people's organizations (POs): the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas-Bicol.

However transition may not happen overnight. That's why diversification of food sources, like livestock, planting of fruit-bearing trees and vegetables is also part of the approach. A school is also integrated for technical courses related to agriculture for its partner POs.

From a relief community, TABI Farm has evolved into a research farm to help farmers mitigate their vulnerabilities to climate change which makes powerful typhoons more frequent.

In the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, climate change is undoubtedly caused by human activities involving global greenhouse gas emissions. These include not only burning of fossil fuels but also from chemicals used in food production.

"We have to organize the farmers in a way that they can survive climate disaster impacts through proactive measures," said Borjal.

Notes to Editor:

1.MASIPAG is one of the six initiative's assessed in a recent report that shows food systems transformation is possible. And it's happening already.

2. Bicol Umalohokan is a group of communicators formed because of Oscar M. Lopez Center's Umalohokan Fellowship. Fellows create a campaign about climate actions and solutions, like the practice of saving seeds in the Philippines.

3. Please attribute the photos to Bicol Umalohokan.