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Aeta Cooperation Project 2011

Poverty alleviation projects abound but how do we ensure that they last? The Aeta Cooperation Project 2011 experience seems to have struck an effective formula.

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It all started with an idea: Japanese students serving the poor in the Philippines. From the time it was conceived in October 2009 to date, eight NGOs and government agencies

have joined hands to support the Aeta Cooperation Project 2011.

Upon the suggestion of someone from the Institute for Kapampangan Studies of Holy Angel University, we identified the Villa Maria Aeta Resettlement in Porac, Pampanga as beneficiary community. The reason: they were “organized and are cooperative.” This is the first of the formula for development work to be effective, COOPERATION is the most basic tenet.

On our first ocular visit to the community, we brought along a friend who works at the Department of Agriculture. The pleasant drive along the SCTEX on that lovely day in December 2010, augured well for the service project.

On that fateful day, what were mere “ideas” that had been playing in our minds since 2009 took solid shape. Along the way, we were joined by a

team of construction workers who do their bit of corporate social responsibility. These workers are members of a cooperative: PARCOMS. Formula number two: get your NETWORK to join you.

The crucial project implementation period arrived. From March 3-11, 2011, we built lavatories for 19 Aeta families in the uplands of Porac and painted two murals for the Villa Maria Integrated School (VMIS), thanks to all the volunteers from GIVE NPO (Japan), KALFI (Manila), PARCOMS (Pampanga) and the local community. Before and after this period, several support projects have also been undertaken: a Christmas gift-giving for Aeta children sponsored by Tagate Club (Angeles City) and the installation of a submersible water pump for the school courtesy of Philippine Mechanization.

Formula number three comes in the form of a virtue: GENUINE SERVICE. Our Japanese friends from GIVE NPO epitomize it.

On the same day a tsunami struck northern Japan, we were on our last day of our service project and had organized a short cultural get-together with our host community. On our way back to our lodgings that same afternoon, we received news about the tragic events in Japan through some calls from friends in Pampanga.

The serenity that the Japanese exuded in those terrible moments was remarkable. It jibed very well with the patience and diligence they showed in the face of the arduous work they carried out in the community. After the hard day's work, the Japanese volunteers also conducted micro-entrepreneurial skills training as well as educational

and cultural activities for the Aeta students of the local school.

A text message we received some days after the service project says it all: “Please pass this till it reaches the ones concerned... something to admire about the Japanese: *walang pumapapel na mayor, walang nagpapanggap na biktima, walang nag-uunahan sa pila at nag-aagawan ng relief goods, walang pumapapel na media, walang politikong nagtatapal ng mukha at pangalan sa relief goods.*” In other words, GENUINE SERVICE.

PARCOM’s innovative technology made it possible for us to construct low-cost family-use lavatories ideal for upland areas. During the initial meetings with leaders of the local community, poor hygiene was identified as a main problem among the upland people. As well as building the lavatories using custom-

built culverts (similar to the water pipes or *tosang*) as septic tanks, a water pump that had been derelict needed to be revived to supply water to the local school where Aeta children will be taught the basics of hygiene and the proper use of lavatories. Fourth formula: COST-EFFECTIVENESS. Every single centavo has to be accounted for. Maximize efforts to mobilize resources. Each Aeta family put in their share of sweat equity and provided the walls of the lavatory's cubicle.

As an offshoot of the cooperation project, efforts have also been undertaken for a long-term development plan in the community. A seminar on *Organic Vegetable Gardening* was conducted on August 20-21, 2011 for the teachers of VMIS and barangay leaders. The project was crafted with inputs from all four stakeholders (the government, the

local school, community members and local volunteers) that would train high school Aeta students in organic farming. The project is an incentive-based intervention that will not only encourage students to pursue their formal education but also improve their family income as well as their health and nutrition. The training was conducted by experts from the Department of Agriculture through the Agricultural Training Institute on community-extension work and organic-based vegetable gardening to equip the volunteers with the knowledge and skills necessary in their role as community and agricultural extension workers. The grounds within VMIS have been used as a model garden for this purpose.

Soon, the community can look forward to the medical mission that will be spearheaded by the Philippine Science High School (Main

Campus) in December 2011. A stone has been dropped and has produced a ripple that has resulted in another bigger ripple and another bigger one and so on. This is our fifth formula: GENEROSITY. There will be more lessons coming as the project service continues. Simply because there is no end to goodness.

The Aeta Cooperation Project 2011 continues to link development projects to the indigenous peoples displaced 20 years ago when Mt. Pinatubo volcano erupted.

The main convenor of ACP 2011 is Iraya Study Center, under the Kalinangan Youth Foundation, Inc. (KALFI).

Inspired by the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría Escrivá, Iraya Study Center promotes the professional, cultural, personal and spiritual development of women students and young professionals

who come to participate in its activities.

Canonized on October 6, 2002 by Blessed John Paul II, St. Josemaría's message to ordinary Christians is to “seek Christ in ordinary everyday life... and to give back to material realities and to the most trivial occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning.”

The Filipino *bayanihan* spirit lives on and you could be a part of it. Contact the ACP 2011 coordinator at calotsp@yahoo.com to find out more about its programs.

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