

GREAT Women Project



Hardin ng Kalikasan

An Emerging Model of A Learning
and A Resilient Women's Cooperative



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Growing from a livelihood project to a women's cooperative

Hardin ng Kalikasan is the cooperative partner of the Department of Trade and Industry-Cottage Industry and Technology Center (CITC) under the GREAT Women Project in Real, Quezon. From a livelihood project for women, Hardin blossomed into a resilient women's cooperative that sprung from adversity and scarcity of resources.

Hardin ng Kalikasan was initiated as a livelihood project by the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion in Barangay Kiloloron in the Municipality of Real, Quezon Province. In 1997, the Sisters Anne Brittain, NDS and Oonah O'Shea, NDS, initiated Hardin to provide livelihood activities to the women of Real.

The Municipality of Real, then a third-class municipality, had limited economic opportunities. Men would often migrate and look for work in neighboring towns, cities and provinces. Women, on the other hand, are into domestic work while some assist their spouses in logging, charcoal-making and fishing.

With this economic condition, the nuns organized a card-making training for the women of Barangay Kiloloron and shelled out a couple of hundred dollars as start-up capital for commercial card paper production. The cards produced were sold to the Sisters of Sion's friends and family in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Soon after, the nuns taught handmade paper making using natural materials, such as cogon grass, water lily, and banana trunks. These materials replaced the less environment-friendly materials such as commercial card paper. Hardin became known to national government agencies, especially the Department of Trade and Industry-Cottage Industry Technology Center (DTI-CITC), when the group sought trainings on product development. Later on, the Department of Trade and Industry-Cottage Industry Technology Center (DTI-CITC) and other non-government organizations supported the handmade paper making of the Hardin women and trained them on soap making to supplement card-making during the rainy season.

The Hardin women then produced cards, bookmarks, notebooks, gift tags, bags, fans, paper bead jewelry, and herbal soaps. Their products are made from natural materials including cogon grass, banana trunks, coconut husks and Japanese mulberry. The Sisters of Sion, their friends and family continuously marketed Hardin products by word-of-mouth, reaching the United States and Australia.

In 2001, Hardin was registered as a women's multi-purpose cooperative with 43 women members to enable profit sharing and increase market linkaging and networking. The cooperative was organized into a five member-board and three committees such as paper making, card making and paper binders/soap making).



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In November 2004, typhoons Winnie and Yoyong, brought floods that swept the Hardin workshop. Supplies, materials and paper-making equipment painstakingly acquired through the years were either wiped out or damaged.

Community organizers then helped the Hardin women resume cards production despite the lack of materials and equipment. DTI-CITC came back and saw Hardin women's commitment to rebuild their cooperative. With this, Hardin was nominated by DTI-CITC as its women's cooperative partner under the GREAT Women Project and, in 2008, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed between PCW and DTI-CITC to concretize the partnership.

Under the GREAT Women Project, interventions with Hardin follow a seven-fold objective:

- Help Hardin, as a cooperative, mature as an organization through values and leadership formation.
 - Build members' competencies in the areas of production, product design and development, business and marketing management.
 - Create and strengthen market linkages for enterprise viability.
 - Improve Hardin's production through rehabilitation, design and prototyping of women-friendly and quality assurance tools and equipment, technical consultancy services and transfer of attendant technologies.
- Establish a sustainable raw materials farm.
- Empower Hardin as a self-reliant cooperative.
- Establish partnership among key players, such as the local government unit and other national government agencies for the continuity of the enterprise.

Asserting status as a cooperative. The GREAT Women Project assisted in preparing Hardin for managing partnerships with national government agencies. Their newly-enhanced skills in negotiation and partnership were useful as Hardin worked to maintain its status as a cooperative.

After the floods swept of all Hardin's organizational documents, it became difficult to prove their status as a cooperative. Hardin constantly coordinated with the Cooperative Development Authority and underwent auditing to be rightly classified as a producers' cooperative, and not as a fisherfolk cooperative.



Thinking and moving big as a women's cooperative

Footnote:

¹ Loreto Apilado, email correspondence, July 16, 2011.

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Transformation of the cooperative and its women

"We want to stay as a cooperative because ownership resides in its members; we do not want to be reclassified as an NGO," Sister Anne Brittain said.

Strengthening as an organization. CITC resource person Loreto Apilado, an expert in handmade paper making and bookbinding, worked with Hardin on their handmade paper making initiatives. He observed that Hardin women were bent on small-time operations and needed to cultivate better work values.¹

Hardin project manager Ofelia Ballarbare affirmed such observation: "Before the GREAT Women Project, the cooperative was disorganized and members were not fully involved." In the past, Hardin demonstrated an informal structure typical of family-owned enterprises in Real. Tasks such as payroll management, file keeping, and overall operational management were taken up by available members.²

The GREAT Women Project then took steps to support Hardin's organizational development. A one-day values orientation workshop conducted by CITC enabled Hardin members to collectively determine its organizational goals and develop its logo.

Having participated in business development and entrepreneurship seminars of DTI-Philippine Trade Training Centre (PTTC), Hardin members also learned the importance of assigning a management team. Now, tasks such as filing, book-keeping and accounting, are specifically assigned to persons who can handle them.³

Creating sustainable sources of materials. Previously, Hardin only used fallen banana trunks, young coconut husks, cogon grass, and recycled paper as its materials. CITC supported the establishment of a raw materials farm that grows plant species for paper-making and provides ready and sustainable source of materials year-round. Located in a rich-soil area near Hardin's production site, the farm abundantly grows Japanese paper mulberry, abaca, banana, yellow ginger, salago, apatot, achuete, and other plant species for paper and dye-making.⁴

The farm also reduced the overhead costs of sourcing the materials from other places which made the cooperative more viable. The women's group also practices solid waste management in their worksites and on the riverbanks near their farms.

Making paper production women-friendly. After the 2004 flash floods, the paper making equipment that Hardin acquired were either wiped out or damaged. Women members improvised by making a press made from a jack and two wooden planks to

Footnotes:

³ GWP Baseline Study.

⁴ Hardin ng Kalikasan brochure.

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squeeze water for a mat of fibers and facilitate paper drying. Such improvised equipment and other manual processes made paper making labor-intensive, product quality low, and product design limited.

With these conditions, CITC carefully planned and provided equipment prototyping and rehabilitation to make paper production efficient, safe, women-friendly, and ergonomic. CITC installed the Naginata beater assembly and accessories. The beater, which had a stainless steel drain box, moving cart and safety hood, prevented accidents. A multi-purpose dryer was also set up to ensure high productivity and quality of products. A prototyped mould and deckle assembly with a stainless steel vat was also constructed to increase production.

The work area layout was also changed to follow occupational health and safety standards. Dividers in the papermaking area were removed to allow women roll the paper pulp vats from one area to another, instead of carrying the paper pulp on their backs. The cooking stove now had a steel chimney and cover, preventing workers to inhale wafting smoke. The new cooking vat efficiently processed large amounts of plant fibers which women can cook about ten kilograms of one type of plant fiber every two hours. A pulley and a chain connected to the vat enabled workers to draw up the cauldron with cooked plant fibers. Women were grateful that with the new cooking stove, they no longer inhaled swafting smoke.

The cost of equipment upgrade was reduced to half since usable parts from the old equipment were used. DTI-CITC spearheaded the design and prototyping of equipment. Each piece of prototyped equipment was produced as a result of consultation between the project implementer and beneficiaries. Careful design minimized equipment costs and reduced wastage.

Women were initially concerned with the changes with their production system, as they adapted to new equipment. Women, however, had to adjust because they are being equipped for large-scale production.

Building capacities to become a women's enterprise. Previously, Hardin's members assembled products to meet daily output. At times, lack of attention for product quality resulted to materials wastage and low-quality products. With the project's interventions, Hardin members, for example, consciously determined various paper types for each product to reduce wastage and lower operational expenses.

Footnote:

⁵ Esperanza Salomon, interview by the author, Real, Quezon, May 31, 2011.

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In the past, Hardin ng Kalikasan only had fair trade as its means of doing business. With the GREAT Women Project, Hardin began looking at 'creating products on demand' as its business strategy.

Hardin members initially had a difficult time understanding business concepts. Women were then trained using a personalized approach, especially when applying marketing techniques; this later gained self-confidence and self-reliance among women members.

"Before, it was one of the nuns who spoke with visitors but with training, we are now used to face people." said Esperanza Salomon, 52, and a Hardin member.⁵

Trainings such as Effective Negotiation and Marketing Skills also helped women negotiate with individuals and corporate clients, and secure customer orders from them. With skills in negotiation, Hardin lobbied to be part of Real's supported products under the One Town, One Product (OTOP) program. Since then, the municipality is marketing Hardin's products for its high-quality and being uniquely made in Quezon. Hardin is likewise actively participating in the GWP technical working group discussion on simplifying business registration for WMEs.⁶

Hardin members are well able to negotiate product pricing. Avelina Bugtong, a Hardin member, described that she refused to significantly mark down the price of bulk orders at a trade show. With the right price, Hardin members showed their value for their products and labor.⁷

Hardin women members are now more driven in looking for their own economic and self-development opportunities. When business is slow, women seek other sources of income. Those with organization roles sought out courses such as accounting and bookkeeping to enhance their skills. Social protection coverage from PhilHealth and the Social Security System were sought not only by the members but extended to their families.⁸

"Because I also earn, I can decide where my earnings will go and I need not ask for my husband's permission. I know now how to manage my life as a woman, my family as a mother," Ofelia Ballarbare said.

"Through trainings sponsored by the GREAT Women Project, Hardin members became mindful of product quality, productive ways of managing business and the well-being of its members. Women realized they can be economically productive in their homes and in business."

*Ofelia Ballarbare
Hardin ng Kalikasan
Project Manager*

Footnotes:

⁶ Maila Lagazon, interview by the author, Real, Quezon, June 1, 2011.

⁷ Avelina Bugtong, interview by the author, Real, Quezon, May 31, 2011.

⁸ Ballarbare, interview.

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Building market linkages. The GREAT Women Project supported Hardin in developing its product market. Activities, such as trade fairs and exhibits, introduced Hardin to linking with other trade exporters and buyers. It also sponsored Hardin to attend the 18th & 20th Buy Pinoy Exporter's Fair in SM Megamall in Mandaluyong City and the 2011 National Trade Fair at SMX Mall of Asia, Pasay City. Such exposure gave members ideas on developing their enterprise and determining their competitiveness with other groups.

The municipal government of Real also plans to help out with marketing by setting-up a product website, holding a paper festival and product positioning. "The local government could help us in terms of tourism. They could bring our products to the beach and other tourist destinations. At least, in these places, tourists can see our products and buy them," said Maila Lagazo, another Hardin member, said.

Hardin has also been introduced as a cooperative to conferences and fora where CITC was represented. Some paper products were also displayed in conference fairs.

Improving and diversifying products. The CITC also trained Hardin on processing of new fiber materials to be grown in the materials farm and new hand paper-making techniques for arose, piña and other raw materials. About 20 trained pulpers are now versatile in a combination of east and west paper-making processes, including paper conversion.

Sister Brittain noted that technology transfer of handmade paper-making was effortless due to the mentor-apprentice relationship between CITC and the Hardin women that facilitated learning. Women welcomed the technical assistance of in-house designers to learn basic design concepts and improve product designs, and quickly absorbed new techniques. Hardin women designers participated in shows to see latest paper design trends and products. Now, Hardin paper product designs moved from purely nature-inspired to more sophisticated and modern geometric designs.

Trainings in product development inspired women to venture into other products, such as boxes, note cards, picture frames, paper bags and herbal soaps. Hardin produce soap varieties that use local herbs such as acapulco for body odor prevention and guava for wound healing.

