# A green patch in Davao's blue waters

**By Tomasito Villarin***

DEVELOPING green patches in an otherwise grey landscape is a challenge that advocates and practitioners of sustainable development often face. The story of a fishing community in Davao Oriental, Governor Generoso town, is one such green patch. The community-based ecological enterprise project earned for the municipality, and the NGOs-POs behind the project, the third prize in the prestigious Toolkit Citizens Participation Award of the Netherlands in 2004, an internet-based global competition in promoting participatory governance. The first prize went to the Metropolitan city of Nelson Mandela in South Africa; second prize went to the city of Blacktown, Australia.

Situated in southwestern Davao Oriental, Governor Generoso has 20 barangays, of which 14 arre coastal, all facing the Davao Gulf. A census in year 2000 showed a population of 42,705 with 8,297 households. Majority of the households (5,000) are fisherfolk, mostly subsistence fishermen. Fishing and farming are the major sources of livelihood.

The town is known for its vast (90,000 hectares) marine grounds; subsistence fishers contributed about 35 percent of the total municipal fish production, and the remaining 65 percent, by commercial fish operators in the town and in nearby Mati town. A single big operator controls commercial fishing with its eight 5-tonner boats and several hundreds of employees. The community, however, has long declared war on commercial fishing — which it blames for the "overfishing" — and got the Sanggunian to ban this within the 15-km municipal waters.

Municipal fishery data show that most of the traditional marine/fishing grounds have been degraded, with fish yield declining. This has triggered alarm bells and generated suggestions for urgent measures: the regulation of fishing, restrictions of commercial fishers vis-à-vis the small fishermen in the area; and alternative fishing methods in order to ensure no disruption of local fish supply.

The people also elected in 2001 a new set of local officials deemed to be proenvironment. The new local government quickly initiated a food

security program to financially support small fishers and provide cheap and readily available supply of fish for the local populace. The NGU partnered with NGOs in a community organizing program that set up fisherfolk cooperatives in each barangay. The mayor also initiated aa livelihood assistance program, in coordination with the Fisheries Resources Management Council (FARMC), NGOs and fisherfolk groups. A series of barangay development planning sessions was held, through a participatory rural appraisal (BDP-PRA) training and actual planning, in partnership with NGOs like the People's Alternative Development Center and the Sustainable Integrated Area Development SIAD Initiatives in Mindanao Convergence for Asset Reform and Regional Development (SIMCARRD). The result: the resort to a barangay-based "payaw" fishing method. "Payaw" is an indigenous, environment-friendly method proven efficient in many parts of the country.

The presence of organized communities of fisherfolk and farmers was a strong mark of this project. The new set of proenvironment officials starting in 2001 also helped change the tide in favor of the small fishers and farmers. The most prominent of these is ex-priest Jerry dela Cerna, who in the 1990s was already active in a campaign against illegal logging. Father Jerry, as he is fondly called,

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was the moving force behind the "Barug Governor Generoso""movement composed of organizations of the church, laity, farmers, women and fishers.

Tired of traditional politics and the lack of political alternatives in his hometown, Father Jerry entered the electoral fray in 1998, but their group was soundly beaten, with his background as a former priest used successfully by rivals to muddle the issues. A second try in 2001 was successful. Besides sheer determination and solid organizing work, the group got help from the NGOs and the Akbayan (Citizens' Action Party). The poll victory was replicated in 2004, with dela Cerna winning along with his vice mayor and seven (out of eight) councilors.

SIM-CARRD, meanwhile, started work in the town in late 2003. Set up by NGO figures involved in agrarian/asset reform, local governance, network formation and peace-building in Mindanao, it has been at work for more than five years now. It is regarded as the secretariat of the Barangay-Bayan Governance Consortium in Mindanao (BBGC), a network of local NGOs doing community organizing for resource tenure improvement, democratic participation in governance, and network formation and peace advocacy. SIM-CARDD was set up with the help of the Institute of Politics and Governance.

SIM-CARRD's partner in the BDP-PRA sessions in 20 barangays, the local-based NGO called People's Alternative Development Center (PADC), was strategic in consolidating the political and community organizing objectives of the project. It has a presence in the so-called "Balusig" municipalities—Banay-banay, Lupon, San Isidro and Governor Generoso towns, all facing the Davao Gulf and comprising the second legislative district.

## Payaw fishing method

Filipino subsistence fishermen have traditionally used payaw or fish shelter and its prototype called fish-aggregating devices (FADs). Local fishermen adopted the FAD with some modifications in order to attract different species of pelagic fish. Payaw was observed to greatly boost the catch of tuna, tuna-like and other pelagic species within the 15-kilometer municipal waters.

The fish shelters or FAD will be installed at the boundaries of the municipal waters of Governor Generoso. Fifty units of payaw will be distributed to the 14 coastal barangays, four of which are delineated as marine and fish sanctuaries where commercial fishing is barred. The fishing operations usually last 10 months from March till December. January and February are lean months, and an occasion for the fish population in municipal waters to be replenished. Payaw are repaired and maintained during lean months, and new ones installed.

The payaw system is a deep-sea, double-layer bamboo raft built and deployed at several layers of boundaries within municipal waters, to be used by the marginal fisherfolk's hook and line fishing, gill netting and other types of nondestructive fishing gear. It will also operate along the food chain link or prey-predator relationship. The double-layer bamboo will be lashed together in V-shape forms, the most commonly used payaw at present. The raft has a floating section with the fish shelter attached below; the mooring line section composed of cable wire and rope and other accessories; and the anchor made of concreted sand and gravel. The bamboo raft payaw lasts for one year, depending on sea surface conditions. In other areas, payaw are built of sturdier materials like metal frames and trusses, which last longer but cost more. These types are targets of pirates and thieves, which sell the metal to junk shops.

The payaw project is meant to provide sustainable livelihood to small fisherfolk associations, while protecting and enhancing the sustainability of the coastal marine environment.

Specifically, it aims to:

1) strengthen the organizational capacity of small-scale fishermen to manage the project for their direct benefit;

2) operate nondestructive fishing accessories and support small-scale fishermen for easier, additional income;

3) ensure abundant fish supply and enhance local food security;

4) stop the unfair competition provided by commercial fishing against marginal fisherfolk in the same area.

## Technical aspects

The fish shelter project was done by fisherfolk associations in 14 coastal barangays and supervised technically by the Fisheries Management Union of the LGU. The NGOs, through the Foundation for Sustainable Societies Inc. provided a soft loan to build it; with the municipal LGU shouldering pre- and post-project expenses and the deployment of a 10-tonner mother boat, to be used for fishing in the payaws set up along the 15-kilometer boundaries. Local fisherfolk organizations and the barangay governments were tasked to organize the Project Management Committees to supervise the payaw in the 1-7-kilometer municipal waters.

The project will be evaluated and monitored by the assisting NGO and the LGU representative. Installed at 1,000 to 1,400 fathoms deep, the payaw also serve as markers to delineate the water's municipal boundaries. The wind, wave direction, water current, water surface topography and presence of small fish like anchovies, among others, as food for large migratory fish like tuna, are all considered in determining payaw sites.

**Marketing operation**

Disposition of the fish catch from the payaw is determined from the start, through a consultation among local fisherfolk federation and the municipal PO federation under Barug Governor Generoso. For each payaw, the payaw-owning fisherfolk-barangay gets 25 percent of the harvest of the LGU's mother boat; another 25 percent goes to paying the soft loan; another 25 percent for maintenance/operations; and the last quarter-share as municipal proceeds. Of the 25-percent share of the fisherfolk-owners, 10 percent are for expenses for project repair, maintenance and marketing. Each payaw is estimated to catch on average 600-1,000 kilos per day (assuming 40-50 payaw established) during peak season.

The fisherfolk associations of all coastal barangays are the direct beneficiaries, being the payaw owners; but they are responsible for marketing their share of the catch.

**Organization and management**

The proposed FADs are under the SIM-CARRD's ownership, to be transferred later to the local fisherfolk organization-barangay government upon payment of the direct cost of P30,000 per payaw over a 30-month period. The FAD's operation shall also be monitored from time to time by an LGU representative, SIM-CARRD and by the MFMU personnel for proper guidance and project operation.

**Mechanism for implementation**

The direct beneficiaries are a group of bonafide small fisherfolk and residents of coastal barangays of Governor Generoso town. They are venturing in this to uplift the local fishery industry and help keep the municipal waters in optimum production condition. From their income share (25 percent from the purse seine or ring net production), they can maintain the project and set up more payaw units.

Throughout the ecological enterprise project phase, the proponent envisions strengthening the organizational stand as a means of boosting income and distributing resources.

**Project costs**

(a) Construction of the FADs is the counterpart of the project proponent.

(b) Five FAD units will be deployed for each coastal barangay, excluding the four coastal barangays to be identified as marine/fish sanctuaries.

(c) Fifty fish shelters will be set up, to cost an average of P30,000 per unit, excluding labor and other organizational expenses (deployment of payaw, organizational meetings), which will cost P7,000 per payaw; the latter will be the counterpart of the community/LGU.

(d) SIM-CARRD's counterpart is the monitoring of the project.

**Prospects and obstacles**

The FSSI approved a total of P900,000 for the project to fund the construction and installation of 48 FADs/payaws with the fund to be received by SIM-CARRD in two and a half years. The SIM-CARRD signed a memorandum of agreement with the LGU, fisherfolk federation and the FARMC last April 19, 2004. The first tranche of P60,000 was released in April 2004 and the second tranche of P420,000, in June 2004. The rest was released in September 2004,

The proponent waited until after the May 2004 elections to start the project. The incumbent mayor, a first-term official, had initiated the 1.5-kilometer ban on commercial fishing and promoted social reforms, which were resisted by certain groups. He rode on these reforms to snatch electoral victory, with him and his party bagging all contested municipal posts except two slots for councilor. One anecdote making the rounds tells of how the fishes helped the mayor because two days before the polls, there was a bountiful catch, negating the vote-buying activities of the enemies of reform.

The losers filed preproclamation protests to deny Mayor dela Cerna of viuctory. Despite Comelec decisions dismissing five of the 12 cases, the losers invoked an en banc ruling and threatened to go to the Supreme Court. People's organizations in turn launched a sit-down protest in the town on June 26, culminating I a vigil until July 1, 2004, when the local Comelec proclaimed dela Cerna and his slate winners.

With their mandate clear, the mayor and his partymates pursued the reforms earnestly, and one

of the vehicles for doing this was the project with SIM-CARRD.

Twenty payaws have been installed and now operational; some 300 kilos of tuna and other pelagic fishes are harvested daily, with the catch distributed to barangay buying stations for domestic consumption. Each barangay identifies indigents in the area, for entitlement to a 40-percent discount. The excess catch is then sold to the "lab-aseros" or the fish compradors or a people's organization/cooperative. The average harvest of 500 kilos daily is expected to rise once the target of 48 payaws is reached.

The project saw management problems in late 2004, because of the lack of clear systems and accountabilities. A fracas erupted among the mother boat's crewmen, leading to the termination of jobs of 45 people. The project management staff, where lines of authority were vague, was the object of a revamp. Before, all decisions had to be brought to the mayor, which was not feasible because he is a busy man. Two key people were later identified as pointmen, one in charge of production and boat operations; another, for marketing of produce. Both report to the mayor and the PMC.

Besides management issues, the project faces stiff competition from commercial fishing operators who have also set up their own payaws. Established fish traders also dictate prices and control small fishers who owe them loans often given at onerous rates. Thus, SIM-CARRD plans to venture into a direct fish marketing/buying side with the small fishers' group and the municipal fishing project—the point being to deny middlemen of a chance to buy fish at ridiculously low rates——by offering a competitive price and direct marketing links between fisherfolk and consumers. In early December 2004, a women's organization called Malakaya based in Davao City entered into a memorandum of agreement with SIM-CARRD to market the fish in urban poor communities in Davao City. SIM-CARRD agreed to provide them with a fishcar payable in 1-2 years if Malakaya puts up its counterpart of at least P50,000 for fish trading/buying.

Project partners and beneficiaries paid their loans only twice, despite an enforceable contract of repayment they signed with SIM-CARRD. Such was attributed to the abovecited management problem. Externalities like pricing, trader control, volume of fish catch, and increased maintenance cost are seen to complicate the chances of repayment within the 30-month period agreed upon.

Meanwhile, the municipal government is also starting to venture into seaweed production. It has crafted a feasibility study and business plan to produce and market seaweed in Governor Generoso and two outlying towns—Banay-Banay, Davao Oriental and in Pantukan, Davao del Norte. This venture complements the payaw project and the town's coastal resource management plan.

On hindsight, it may be surmised that community-based reform programs can generate an exciting impact on local livelihoods. However, they also open up an entirely new field to community stakeholders like a full-blown community enterprise that operates within the realm of market forces. The lack of capacity and skills of the reform constituency can be a real hindrance to achieving the goals of the ecological enterprise project, as well as sustaining the gains in local governance reforms.