



From Homemakers to Leaders :

A Community's struggle through the eyes of two Mothers **By Jasper Bungay, AHDP**



“Life, misfortunes, isolation, abandonment, poverty, are battlefields which have their heroes; obscure heroes, sometimes greater than the illustrious heroes.” – Victor Hugo



Julie delos Santos Mulatao , Barangay Funda Dalipe, San Jose, Antique.

Under the searing heat of the midday sun, Julie delos Santos Malutao studies the ramshackle hut she is about to visit. She is here seeking one more signature for a petition to the municipal government to construct drainage in her village, Barangay Funda-Dalipe. As she walks closer she is assailed by the familiarity of the situation. Many of the homes she'd been to today are pictures of quiet poverty, of families coping with subsistence—a story very much her own.

Julie was born the fifth of 11 siblings in a household of fishers. Money was hard to come by. With so many young mouths to feed, her parents were too busy looking for money to attend to them. Julie learned to fend for herself at an early age. By age six, she was already cooking for the family. At nine, she took care of her younger siblings. At 15, she was working as a salesgirl to keep herself and the rest of her brothers and sisters in school. Julie skipped childhood to be a mother to her siblings. Julie continues to play this role of mother and provider, this time to her own five children. Like her mother and her maternal grandmother, she didn't graduate from college. She too married a fisherman. Like her mother, she took on many jobs, like selling her husband's fish catch, and raising hogs and chickens. She even had a stint as a medical secretary for a local EENT clinic. All these jobs were on top of her usual chores at home. "Ang pagkayod nagatugro kanakun kang purus, kapin pa kung makita ko nga matawhay kami nga nagakabuhi." (Seeing my family live through another day gives me the strength and resolve to work hard.)

Despite her frenzied life, Julie found time to volunteer her services to her community. She was a Barangay Service Point Officer (BSPO) from 1994 to 2000, earning about US\$4.00 a month, and a Barangay Secretary from 2000 to 2007 for US\$70.00 monthly. Now at 45, Julie, with a wide toothless smile and much bravado, considers all these experiences as her "childhood" – that stage in

her life when she gained maturity and character. Across town in Barangay 8, Nelita “Ike” Pagunsan Albuera is packing up syringes, stethoscopes, sphygmomanometers, and weighing scales after a morning of immunizations to children in her village. This is a pet project for Ike, being a Barangay Nutrition Scholar (BNS) for 25 years now and earning US\$10.00 a month.

Ike, 41, is a quiet, unassuming woman whose demeanor belies her strong will. Years of hardship have taught her to be self-sufficient and enterprising. Born to a farming household, Ike was married at 18, like many girls her age then. She now has six children. Like Julie Malutao, Ike and her husband Jovito do not have a college degree. To eke out a living, Jovito dabbles in farming, fishing, and livestock-raising. Ike, on the other hand, makes ginamus (fish paste) and nipa shingles, occasionally gives massage service, and tends to her small sari-sari store. All that on top of her regular duties as a barangay official.



Nelita “Ike” Pagunsan Albuera makes nipa shingles beside her sari-sari store.

“Bilang sangka nanay, responsibilidad ko ang magbulig pangita para sa amun kinawara.” (Being a mother, it is my responsibility to earn money for our family’s wellbeing.) The Albuera couple’s reward—three of their children have graduated with professional degrees, one with a vocational certificate, and two are currently enrolled in college. Ike believes that a college diploma, something she never had, is a way out of poverty. The only ambition she has left is to see all her children graduate, land a stable job and raise a loving family.

Julie Malutao and Ike Albuera are just two of the 70 percent poor folk in the town of San Jose de Buenavista, capital of the island-province of Antique. San Jose is a first-class urbanizing municipality composed of 28 barangays, all of which are categorized as urban.

Pressure of **socio-economic issues**

With plans to attain city status and given a fast growing population, San Jose de Buenavista faces increasing pressure on all fronts: health, education, trade and commerce, infrastructure, peace and order, environmental issues, and other concerns.

Paramount in addressing all these demands is the improvement of service delivery by the municipal and barangay local government units (LGUs) through transparent, responsive and participatory governance.

Better service delivery is embedded in San Jose's vision of an "economically progressive and ecologically balanced urban community, responsively governed in partnership with civil society and adequately responding to people's needs and aspirations." Its mission is to "exercise transparency, accountability and participatory governance in the implementation of development undertakings."

True to these aspirations, the municipal and barangay LGUs of San Jose embraced initiatives towards enhancing participation in local governance in the past. The Antique Human Development Program (AHDP), Inc., through its Barangay-Bayan Governance Project in 1999–2003, stimulated greater appreciation for the Local Government Code's provisions on participatory governance.

In concrete terms, the Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran (BAKAL) project allowed the local government and AHDP to be partners anew and build on the gains of previous participatory governance initiatives.

Community leaders learn the ropes

The BAKAL project provides opportunities for government, civil society and community volunteers like Julie and Ike to come together towards true democratic governance. Although focused on only three barangays (Fundalipe, Barangay 8 and Barangay 3), BAKAL has opened doors for marginalized sectors across San Jose de Buenavista to participate in barangay governance, and consequently, for barangays and their constituencies to be heard at the higher municipal and provincial levels.

When Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran started in San Jose de Buenavista with AHDP as implementer, both Julie and Ike were already community workers. Julie was a Barangay Secretary and Ike, a Barangay Nutrition Scholar. In the course of their work, both were in regular contact with marginalized fisherfolk and farmers grumbling about low yield; vendors, drivers and workers searching for alternative livelihood; out-of-school youth hunting for scholarships, and mothers seeking better health and nutrition for their children.

As volunteers, Julie and Ike felt inadequate in responding to the wide spectrum of issues they confronted daily, stark experiences that underscored their isolation from decision-making processes. They realized that the local government was in the best position to help people gain self-sufficiency by providing programs that responded to the people's clamor. Through Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran they became aware that they had a role to play in making decisions, and that for government to be more responsive, it needs to be more accessible first.

The BAKAL project imparted practical participatory tools in planning (through the Barangay Development Planning-Participatory Learning and Action (BDP-PLA): budgeting, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation—that opened up more space for communication between government and communities. These interventions taught participants how to engage local governments and work hand in hand with them to improve the situation in their communities.

At the same time, Julie and Ike's communities were organized with the help of AHDP in order to strengthen their collective voice and assist in their engagements with the local government. Both women even became officers of Women Moving Forward Towards Empowerment and Nation-Building (WOMEN-Antique), a municipal-level federation of women's organizations that came up with its own agenda for development with strong emphasis on women's concerns.

Together with other people's organizations and community residents, the BAKAL project allowed community folk, including Julie and Ike, to take political center stage, instead of being relegated as mere bystanders or just recipients of decisions they had no hand in making.

This was evident in the zealous involvement and insightful input contributed during the BDP-PLA, in other capacity building activities and sectoral meetings and consultations. The project, in fact, fulfilled the long-sought provisions of the Local Government Code of the Philippines for democratic governance.

Julie was particularly impressed when she and other sectoral representatives had a hand in formulating their Barangay Development Plan (BDP). This was traditionally done only by members of the council. Being an active part of the process gave her, as with Ike and other community leaders, a sense of accomplishment.

They own the plan, and it was also up to them to see it to fruition. "Masadya ako bilang sangka ordinaryo nga mangingisda nga naka-entra ako sa pagplano para sa barangay. Te, pursigehun gid namun nga matuman ang plano," said Loloy, one of the participants of the BDP-PLA. (As a marginal fisherman, I am happy to have been a part of the barangay planning, something unheard of in our barangay. I now have a stake in the plan, so I must push for its implementation.)



San Jose de Buenavista, Antique.

In the pledging session that followed their development planning, Julie and Ike together with other village folk armed with their respective BDPs, met external stakeholders that could possibly respond to their needs. So far, the Office of the Congressman has committed to finance one priority infrastructure project in each of the three barangays.

Another major achievement of the project in the three covered barangays was the setting up of actual mechanisms for people's participation. Local special bodies such as the Barangay Development Council (BDC), Bids and Awards Committee (BAC), and the General Assembly were reinforced and refocused towards their true purpose to serve as windows for people's involvement. Julie, for instance, used to be a barangay secretary, and under BAKAL, she got the chance to sit in the BDC of Barangay Funda Dalipe as sectoral representative for Abakadagat, a people's organization of fisherfolk.

Under BAKAL, barangay plans were opened up to participation through the BDC, unlike before when they were formulated and implemented solely by the barangay council. The BDC now meets twice a year to plan, budget, monitor and evaluate programs and projects. The format of the General Assembly has also been transformed from mere reporting of the barangays' accomplishments and financial status to include discussions for various sectors in the community to pitch their own concerns for inclusion in the Barangay Development Plan.

Reaching the **grassroots**

The BAKAL project was instrumental in this paradigm shift as it even allowed for innovations in enhancing people's participation. One such innovation was extending participation down to the sub-units of the barangay, the puroks¹. People at this level were organized and their leaders granted automatic representation in special bodies at the barangay level. This came about as a response to the problem of dwindling involvement of community folk in governance, identified during the BDP-PLA process. "We have our own struggles to deal with, why bother with that of the barangay," was the common reply from people when invited to barangay-level activities. But when the barangay officials called for purok meetings, the people surprisingly came in droves. These same people realized that many of their collective concerns could be resolved faster through collaboration between them and their officials.

For instance, in one purok in Funda-Dalipe, the lack of drainage continually caused health and sanitation problems for children, especially during the rainy months. A petition, spearheaded by the barangay council and signed by the affected households, is now ready to be submitted to the municipal government for action. It is seldom seen in local politics for officials to willingly share their power. BAKAL was successful in achieving this by making the governed and government see common grounds for collaboration.

Julie and Ike are in the middle of all these transformations, helping to mobilize their communities, and leading the way towards participatory governance at the grassroots level. In fact, they felt these same transformations within themselves. If they were once content to be on the periphery as volunteer community workers, they are now at the forefront of leadership.

Ultimately, the project gave them the confidence to enter the realm of politics. In the local elections in October 2008, Julie and Ike ran and convincingly won as barangay councilors. Both women attribute their decisions to lessons from the project. "Sa mga inagyan namun nga paghanas, duro ang amun natun-an. Narealisar namun nga masarangan man gali namun. Kung

kaya namun magpatigayon kang amun panimalay, ano gid ang kinalain sa barangay?" (The trainings we have undergone through the project enhanced our knowledge and affirmed our belief in ourselves as leaders. We are leaders at home, why not in the barangay?)



Truly, both Julie and Ike are two of the hardest workers in their respective councils. As local legislators, they introduced laws that drew from their background as health workers and as mothers. Both sponsored ordinances for the socio-economic profiling of their communities. Now, it is easier and quicker for their respective barangay governments to identify beneficiaries for various programs on health, education and livelihood enhancement.

The two councilors continually push for the implementation of programs and projects included in the development plan. They attribute their resolve to being part of the process from the beginning. They have come to value people's participation in barangay affairs, and have vowed to keep alive local venues for participation such as the BDC, purok organizations and the General Assembly.

The communities are learning to maximize their resources in order to accomplish projects identified in their BDPs. Like at home where Julie and Ike have proven to be enterprising, they are also exploring other avenues for co-financing community programs and projects. The project provided them with tools and venues to do so through trainings on participatory budgeting, project development, and through the pledging session.

All three barangays were able to put up barangay co-financed HealthPlus outlets, locally-operated drugstores selling cheap medicine. Funda-Dalipe accessed free medicine from the provincial

government, while Barangays 3 and 8 have conducted entrepreneurship trainings in partnership with the DTI and AHDP. Various other collaborations have been entered into with the municipal government, civil society organizations such as the Rotary Club of Antique, and NGOs such as AHDP and PROCESS Foundation.

The challenge of sustaining gains

BAKAL has provided a template for future partnerships and interventions on participatory governance, particularly between the barangay and municipality. Other barangays in the province, especially the nine in San Jose covered by previous governance projects of AHDP, have also benefited from BAKAL. They are deliberately included in capacity-building trainings; hence, second-liners and new participatory-governance advocates have been developed in these areas. Despite the gains from the BAKAL project, Julie and Ike worry about sustaining interest for participatory governance among the leaders and their constituencies. Still many in their communities remain powerless and isolated. The venues for participation are in place, but how these mechanisms would hold through time remains a question.

But for Julie delos Santos Malutao, whose struggle started even before she was born; for Ike Albuera, whose experience with the project turned her into an avid advocate for people's participation; and for others in the community, whose heroism lies in their constant struggle against poverty—it has become their mission to defend their newfound empowerment.

BAKAL provided them with the tools. The challenge now is to strengthen the spirit of bayanihan and the bond between local government and the people through partnership and collaboration.



San Jose de Buenavista, Antique