

# Bracing the Burdens in Bulan

by Mela Gipanao

Translated by Nina Somera

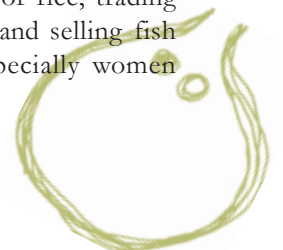
*I am Mela Gipanao, a farmer and organiser in a village in Bulan, Sorsogon, a province southeast of Luzon, the Philippines' biggest island chain. I grew up in a farming family, together with my seven other siblings. Our parents were tenants.*

**I have** also raised my seven children in the same environment. I have chosen to continue live in the farm that my parents tended and work with fellow farmers, especially now that agriculture is hardly being supported by the government.

I guess this choice grew out of my activism which dates back in the 1970s when I had the chance to attend a basic secretarial course at the Philippine College of Commerce and when I became a member of Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youth), a leftist underground organisation that fought the Marcos dictatorship.

So I never had any second thoughts in being a volunteer organiser even after the death of my husband. Today, I head the provincial council of Sandigan ng Magsasaka, a coalition of farming organisations in the Bicol region.

As both mother and father to my children, I have managed to respond to the needs of my family and community in various ways, from planting *palay* or rice, trading coconuts and vegetables, and selling fish to organising farmers especially women farmers.



Food remains the most urgent need of my family on a daily basis, along with the school expenses of my children. Much of my resources allotted for these needs come from my earnings as a fish vendor.

As early as 3 in the morning, I am already at the fish port, selecting the produce that I will later sell. As I walk the streets from 6 am to 9 am, selling my fish, I also take the opportunity to visit and chat with the members of our women's organisation.

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Back in our house, my youngest daughter tries to accomplish as many household chores before she goes to school in the afternoon. Often, she would cook some of my unsold fish for our lunch. In the afternoon, I head to the fields and later, the vegetable plot.

I have always been used to work, especially farming. I cannot see a huge difference between the capacities of a female farmer and that of a male farmer. Based on my experience, the only task which I find difficult to do is tilling the land. Hence I seek the assistance of men in creating burrows on the land.

I have never lost my motivation in tending the farm nor in shepherding my fellow farmers. I love our livelihood and I draw empowerment from advancing our rights as farmers and mentoring second liners, who will continue our collective cause, once older leaders like me are already too physically weak to organise.

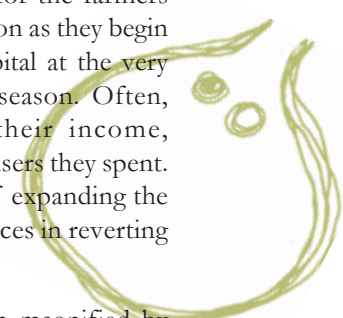
One of our foremost problems is the lack of support from the local government units for sustainable agriculture. This has been a hindrance to farmers who are so keen to shift to organic farming. The prices of our produce are also pegged at very low prices. The price of copra, for instance, is only P17 (US\$0.35) a kilo, when before, it managed to reach P37 (US\$0.76) per kilo.

Sometimes no *palay* is left for the farmers for their family's consumption as they begin to loan money for their capital at the very beginning of the planting season. Often, nothing is left out of their income, considering the cost of fertilisers they spent. We are still in the process of expanding the knowledge, skills and resources in reverting to traditional farming.

These challenges have been magnified by the current food and financial crises. It is heart-breaking to see my fellow farmers who lack basic needs, especially with the aftermath of typhoons, struggle to survive in the midst of poor government intervention and opportunistic traders. Many of our children have stopped their schooling. Women are also bearing much of the impact as we are usually the ones who manage the needs at home, more than the men. It is for this reason that our gender-sensitivity trainings are targetting sons, brothers, husbands and fathers.

Changing weather patterns are also aggravating our situation. Although we have experienced similar crises in the past, their impact was not as grave as the current one. We were prepared then. We were able to plant and harvest some crops in mountainous areas.

In the last quarter of 2008, we had a whole month of too much rain. There was also no money from the sea. More importantly, we had not yet recovered from the super typhoons which devastated much of the Bicol





region. We are not prepared this time. We have not been able to raise swine, chicken and other livestock.



As the breadwinner, I am really having a hard time. I am working doubly hard while at the same time tightening our belts. I am constantly thinking of a livelihood other than farming and selling. These days I am also selling rice at *bayan*, the urban centre.

Significant changes indeed have happened within my family with the current crises. We only eat twice a day, skipping breakfast and afternoon snacks. I can no longer support the schooling of my children nor can I buy new clothes. Last Christmas and New Year's Eve, we could not feel the spirit of the holiday season. We did not have a feast. We only had rice and fried fish on our table.

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As everyone is more keen in attending to the basic needs of their families, there have been less meetings in our organisation.

Indeed we need to be prepared for hard times like these. There has to be a reservoir of resources which we can tap when supplies fall short. It is also important to expand and diversify our crops, other than *palay*. But these measures can be more effectively and empowering when processed through a collective action.



And so we are doubling our efforts in our community farm, where we, women farmers, produce organic fertilisers. Unlike the non-organic fertilisers which cost P1,700 (US\$35) to P1,900 (US\$39) per sack, ours only cost P300 (US\$6) per sack. Ten sacks of organic fertilizer is enough for crops planted in one hectare of land. Currently, most farmers need to buy 21 sacks of expensive but inorganic fertilisers per planting cycle, which takes so much from their gross income.

Matters become worse as their harvest still has to go through a long line of traders, forcing them to price their produce at a minimum. Although using organic fertilisers means low yields in the first few cycles, it nonetheless guarantees safe and healthy food especially for the family.

Moreover, collective action is needed in the farmers' struggle for land. Although some of us are already in the process of claiming ownership of the lands we till, many more farmers have yet to benefit from the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Programme (CARP). We can never ignore them, especially now that there are strong moves to end CARP, which is supposed to distribute both public and private lands, including *haciendas* or big plantations to small farmers.

Our struggles are one. ■

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