CONCEPCION’S MODEL COUPLES. (Left to Right) Gemma and Edsel Moquete and Jahra and Jessie Narciso who are in their thirties, show that planning one’s family results to a better future and a more sustainable environment. Behind the couples is the Marine Protected Area of Brgy. Nipa, Concepcion.

WALKING TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE. Dr. Helen Minguez, Concepcion’s municipal health officer (fifth from left), walks with the residents of Brgy. Nipa during low tide at the mangrove area of the barangay that they are replanting with more mangrove species.

CARRYING THE BOAT THAT CATCHES THE FISH. Fishermen of Brgy. Nipa carry their boats to shore during low tide after a bountiful fish harvest in their 3-year-old Marine Protected Area.

Its the fish catch that tells the story in Concepcion

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If the residents of the coastal village of Nipa in the northern Iloilo town of Concepcion want to know how well their village and its people are faring, all that they have to do is check out the day's catch of the fishermen.

The volume of the fishes caught, their weight, and the variety of species tells a lot about the state of the population, environment, and health of Nipa residents.

This is because when they were in dire straits several decades ago, it was the decline in fish catch that made the Nipa residents realize that they have to take care of their environment, manage their population and make sure they were all healthy enough to contribute to their village's progress.

One of their major interventions to reverse decades of damage to the village was to establish a 10-hectare Marine Protected Area (MPA) in May 27, 2002 with the help of the Save the Children Federation Inc. (SCF) and the University of the Philippines in the Visayas’ Professors Nygigl Armada and Nestor Yunque and Dr. Wilfredo Campos.

The MPA was the result of People and Environment Co-existence Development Project or PESCO-Dev in 2000. With the PESCO-Dev, Nipa residents were able to identify their problems using the Appreciative Community Mobilization (ACM) approach, initiated by the SCF where the residents and their leaders "discovered” their problems, “dreamt”
about their future, “designed” a plan to achieve that dream and “delivered” actions to realize their visions.

The PESCO-Dev integrates the Population, Health and Environment (PHE) program that is currently making inroads in community development work for its success in involving all sectors of the community as well as its capacity to give people the skills to sustain their gains.

BETTER FISH CATCH

Professor Nygiel Armada’s report on the impact of the fish catch in Brgy. Nipa from its monitoring in August 2002 to June 2005 spoke volumes of the success of the integrated PHE approach in the village.

Armada’s report said there was an increase in fish catch from a mere 1.8 kilograms in August 2002 per fishing activity before the MPA to as much as 4.8 kilograms in June 2005.

"The fishing time is much shorter and fishing distance is much nearer, allowing more time for husbands to spend time with their families and get involved in community activities," said the report.

SCF came to Brgy. Nipa in 2000 and even though the program was phased out in 2004, the NGO left the Nipa residents empowered and with enough capabilities to sustain and even improve on their PHE program.

"The fishes have returned because of the political will of Mayor Raul Banias, the local government unit and the barangay officials who implemented the rules. Put up an MPA but if you don't implement the rules, it's useless," said Remy Navarro, a barangay councilman and chair of both the Fishery and Aquatic Marine Council and the Nipa Small Fisherfolk and Farmers Association.

He explained that the independent consultants from the UPV and Green Forum were commissioned by Save the Children to facilitate a participatory environmental site assessment in 2002 found out that 30 percent of the corals in the waters around Brgy. Nipa were dead and it was necessary to put up an MPA.

"It was a difficult process getting people to agree to the MPA since it meant a temporary loss of livelihood," said Navarro, 46.

CHALLENGES OF THE MPA

It took three barangay assemblies before the MPA was approved and when 100 modules made of cement were finally put in the MPA, the village fishermen had to contend with intruding fishermen from other barangays who would catch the fish when they felt no one
was looking.

So far, Navarro said 10 intruders have already been fined after Mayor Banias deputized 12 adult fish wardens but it later turned out that it was the school children whose school faced the MPA who proved most effective.

From their classrooms, those pupils who are now called "little fish wardens" would often peer out of the windows to check out fishing boats in the MPA and if they learn a boat doesn't belong to the village, they would run out to inform the adults.

The increase of the fish catch was a great help to the village. In partnership with SCF, Armada, put a scientific and community based participatory approach in monitoring the fish catch to measure the success of the MPA and its impact on the village.

In 2002, the fishermen's catch would be weighed, the types of fish identified, and their individual weights measured by their colleagues (local fishermen) through technical guidance of Armada. Monitoring was done everyday for one week in a month by eight volunteer fishermen using a motorized banca up to the present.

This was how villagers found out that their coastal environment was getting better because the fishes caught were bigger and heavier and from eight fish species in 2002, it became 12 in 2005.

"Seeing the benefit of the MPA, other coastal barangays in Concepcion are now applying for MPA to be established in their areas. Many fisherfolk are also shifting to environment-friendly fishing gear," said a 2005 Armada report on the fishing activities in Brgy. Nipa.

LINKING FISH CATCH WITH FAMILY PLANNING

"People here felt life getting difficult in 1999 and 2000 when fish catch was getting less. Fishermen would go out to sea at four in the morning and return with just 1.8 kilograms," said 34-year-old Jahra Narciso who, with her husband Jessie, are active Family Planning (FP) volunteers in the village.

The couple explained that the simple laws of nature such as an ecology that could not support a burgeoning population were the cause of all their economic misery.

Thus, during FP sessions, the couple explained that what one does always affects the environment and the people living in it.

"I tell couples that they should plan their families. It does not mean that you have to stop having children but you should put a space of several years among them and plan for their future," said Jahra, a mother of three who uses pills.
Edsel and Gemma Moquete, who have become a "model PHE couple" just like Jessie and Jahra, often bat for family planning during FP sessions, especially when they encounter misinformed fellow villagers.

"At the start of our campaign for family planning, the elders and other villagers had their misconceptions but we made them understand the positive effects of planning your family," said Gemma, a 33-year-old mother of three "birth-spaced" children.

MISCONCEPTIONS ON FAMILY PLANNING

Her husband Edsel said one of the most prevalent misconceptions is that ligation is bad for a woman because it would affect her ability to do household chores, especially carrying heavy weights such as children or buckets of water.

"I'm thankful that my wife was ligated because she could help with our livelihood and she has not complained about having problems carrying heavy things," said Edsel, a laborer.

So far, the local Roman Catholic Church has not complained about the village's family planning activities and the advocacy to use contraceptives even as women of reproductive age start trooping to the health center to ask for pills and such.

The momentum for family planning advocacy is sustained in Brgy. Nipa because the nine FP volunteers composed of eight women and one man do activities together and keep alive their linkages and partnerships with the local government unit, barangay officials and the SCF.

"Other municipalities now call us to conduct trainings on family planning and help their barangays. Our personal gains is that we have developed our relationship with the community as well as our accountability with them," said Gemma.

So far, FP action sessions have been replicated in Concepcion's 14 mainland and 11 island barangays. The town has a total of 25 barangays.

Dr. Helen Minguez, Concepcion’s municipal health officer, said the Narciso and Moquete couples are very effective in family planning advocacy because they themselves practice it and set examples to others of how life becomes enjoyable when families are planned.

MANGROVES, WOMEN, CHILDREN

While others are busy with family planning, the women and children of Brgy. Nipa have started with mangrove reforestation last Oct. 12 this year where they planted 300 mangroves of the pagatpat, bakhaw and miapi species.

It is the school children who make sure the mangroves they have planted are alive and their elders are more than happy that the kids have developed an ownership attitude for
the mangroves.

More mangroves in the MPA would mean plentiful fish because they would use the mangroves as their breeding areas and “houses” aside from the 100 modules thrown in the MPA.

"The children themselves measure the growth of the mangroves and they can even remember who planted which mangrove. We are able to reforest the mangrove area without any expenses because of the help of the community," said Emelinda Abian Concepcion's coastal resource management officer.

Even though PESCO-Dev phased out in September 2004, the community still does its work. Ms. Abian attributes this to the ACM process that identified their needs and wants in the future, thus developing a sense of responsibility for the things that they do.

These days, one can hardly find squids in the MPA of Brgy. Nipa and this is a cause for jubilation for the fishermen and the FARMC chair.

"No squids mean that there are more fish eating them and that means we only have more fish to catch," said Navarro./PN