

Landcare approach: Enhancing community empowerment in conservation farming and agroforestry in the uplands¹

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Abstract

Sustainable land use is one of the focal issues in the debate about rural development in the Philippines uplands, where more than 18 million people live. This paper relates our experiences in a participatory approach to develop technology and institutions for agroforestry at the research site of the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) in Claveria, northern Mindanao, Philippines. Contour hedgerow farming with leguminous trees has come to be viewed as an important agroforestry technology to ensure food security, alleviate poverty, and protect the environment. For several years we focused our efforts in assessing the management strategies to address key technical constraints of this system. We observed that adoption by farmers was low. The reasons for this included high labour requirements in establishing and maintaining the hedgerows, resource competition above and below ground between the hedgerows and the associated crops, limited value-added from the hedgerow prunings, and poor species adaptation.

We therefore refocused our efforts towards finding alternative systems that would address the technical and institutional issues of conservation farming. We found that natural vegetative filter strips provide a simple solution to the technical constraints of soil conservation on slopes. These are buffer strips that are laid out on the contour in which the natural vegetation is allowed to regrow into a thick, protective cover. The strips also provide a foundation for farmers to evolve into complex agroforestry systems with fruit and timber trees. We now see a tremendous surge of adoption of this system.

Adoption has been enhanced by the Landcare approach. Landcare is a movement of farmer-led organisations supported by local government. The organisations share knowledge about sustainable and profitable agriculture on sloping lands while conserving natural resources. There are now over 8000 farmers involved in this movement. As the Landcare groups began to grow, the local government units provided enthusiastic support. This involved the contribution of funds, technical assistance and policy support to the movement. Today, the Landcare movement has grown to over 300 groups in 10 municipalities in northern, central, eastern, and southern Mindanao and in the Visayan islands.

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