

Overview of some examples of information technology (IT)/business development center (BDC) projects in co-ops

...made possible through the "Information Technology for Southeast Asian Co-operatives (it@coops) Project." The Project was held from 2004-2007 in the member-countries of the Asian Women in Co-operative Development Forum (AWCF), namely, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. The Project is implemented in partnership with the Capacity Building International, Germany (InWEnt), and funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Gubat St. Anthony Co-op (GSAC)

Gubat, Sorsogon, in Bicol Region, Philippines

- GSAC has been operating for 43 years in 14 municipalities and one city
- Has 11,811 members (71 percent women)
- Co-op services offered: savings and credit, consumers store, diagnostic laboratory
- The women members' businesses include agriculture (rice, coconuts); food processing, and fishing.
- Mr. Jovito Escalante was sent by GSAC to attend the 100-day training of the it@coops Project held at the Manila office of the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATCCO), a Philippine co-op federation that is a member of the AWCF. The training was held intermittently from October 2005 to May 2006, aiming at producing IT Specialists out of selected people sent by different co-operatives.
- After his training, GSAC signed up Mr. Escalante to be its IT Specialist for five years. He became very active in conducting training that includes topics like an introduction to computers; using Internet, e-mail, chatting; and other topics.
- The training participants in GSAC includes staff and members of the Co-op, more than 180 members of the Co-op's youth savers club, and some school teachers. Plans were made to give training at the *barangays* (villages) using a mobile computer school.
- Mr. Escalante has fixed hours for continuously conducting training (training for staff on Sundays; training for youth on Saturdays).
- GSAC's BDC is operating, currently staffed by Mr. Escalante as BDC Manager, a BDC assistant, and a practicum. It offers Internet café services with 15 personal computers. Other services are tutorial, scanning, printing, layouting (e.g., business cards, brochures, leaflets, invitations), and CD/DVD burning. There are plans to set up a business directory, initiated with GSAC's ongoing data-gathering of its members' enterprise profiles. The Co-op's website is also planned for the year.



- Clientele in GSAC's Internet café is mostly young adults; teachers doing online research; and other clients using e-mail and chat facilities, and printing services
- For the shell handicrafts of GSAC members, the BDC's initial services are product development and design. The Co-op has also sought product consultancy with the provincial office of the Philippine government's Trade and Industry Department.
- Problems encountered by the BDC include conflicting competencies between the BDC Manager and other staff of the Co-op (such as in the Co-op's business development department, and education department), which might complicate efforts to extend the services of the BDC

Labo Progressive Multi-Purpose Co-op (LPMPC)

Labo, Camarines Norte, in Bicol Region, Philippines

- Set up 20 years ago as agricultural community-based co-op by 15 ambulant or mobile farmer vendors and stall holders in the old public market
- Operates in nine municipalities of Camarines Norte
- Has 1,812 members (58 percent women); mostly farmer members (rice, corn, cassava, pineapple, coconut)
- LPMPC engages in cassava production and processing, and rice trading; initiated projects on virgin coconut oil production and integrated pineapple processing; pina cloth handweaving; handmade paper production
- Ms Susan Laguador is LPMPC's IT Specialist trained under the it@coops Project in the Philippines leg. After the training ended in May 2006, she drew up an extensive line of training conducts for the Co-op staff and members.
- The Co-op's exposure and usage of IT also let it gain many benefits for Co-op operation and enterprise development, such as:



- Improved membership records: database of Co-op members was made with updated membership registration and profile, readily available for inquiries even by partners and clients of the Co-op
- Additional Co-op programs and services: after her it@coops training, Ms Laguador led the IT training for LPMPC's officers, management staff, and members. Free training on basic and advanced computer operation was given to all interested members and their immediate family. The products and services of the LPMPC are now being promoted and marketed better through more Co-op-produced attractive brochures, fliers, tarpaulins, and advertisement in its own-created website (www.labocoop.com).
- Improved accounting and bookkeeping: like reduced time for records and document preparation by efficient use of software applications; ability to troubleshoot simple IT problems; and more timely and accurate records.
- Enhanced credit and savings operations: such as the integration of management information system in the loan operation lessened the need for staff, and increased staff's productivity level; members had easier time verifying their accounts and processing their loans; etc. Members' trust in the Co-op was further strengthened because of faster and more accurate transactions. The trust is manifested in the increase in the number of members, increase in members' deposits, etc.

- Improved co-op management: With the basic and advanced IT training on the Internet, computer use, and using IT for Co-op and business, the Co-op officers are now able to personally encode and prepare their reports and simple presentations; there is improved Co-op and staff image to the members; and Co-op has reduced its operational costs.
- Better production and marketing: IT helped the Co-op produce more quality and competitive products, including through having better design and packaging; easier sourcing of raw materials through the Internet; and improving product marketing and communication with potential clients locally and abroad without prohibitive communications costs (like long-distance/overseas calls), especially for its pineapple fiber business.

Bina Desa

East Jakarta, Indonesia

- The Indonesian Secretariat for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (Bina Desa) is based in Indonesia; a non-government organization (NGO) that deals with sustainable rural development
- Founded June 20, 1975, following a meeting-workshop on human rural development held in Bangkok
- Bina Desa is committed to take part in the promotion of human dignity in rural areas (social, economic, political, and cultural) based on gender equality
- To realize the "self-help rural community" known as *Komunitas Desa Swabina*, Bina Desa works closely with peasants (lowest level among farmers), rural women, artisanal fisherfolks, and indigenous people in 11 provinces in Indonesia, composed of 22 villages
- Programs: community organizing; capacity-building; sustainable agriculture; micro-enterprise development; research and publications; and policy advocacy
- In its micro-enterprise (ME) development program, Bina Desa:
 - is concerned with increasing the rural poor's income through income-generating activities like supporting small enterprise development, credit unions and co-ops. ME can absorb the unemployed in the village.
 - realizes that it is important to support women activity in economic development, considering that women have a pivotal role in managing the household economy
 - has introduced a concept of sustained business wherein products are based on the natural resources in each community
 - adopts the strategy of: conducting capacity-building for Bina Desa staff on business plan, business motivation and ideas, IT, market research and product development; exposure and apprentice; and developing co-operation with Karya Insa Co-ops so as to get seed capital for ME entrepreneurs
- Impact of it@coops to Bina Desa:
 - ❖ Bina Desa established LAN (local area network) system in its office computers with unlimited Internet connection
 - ❖ Bina Desa's BDC is able to:
 - Identify economic potentials and arrange profile of economic activities in the community



- Give consultation on ME development focusing on problem solving; production; packaging; increasing value-added and quality control as well as access to market
- Provide capacity-building for the community's economic institution to improve its performance
- Facilitate market access for the community's products through direct market to the consumer as well as indirectly to other traders
- Shorten the market chain in order to give more benefits to the community
- Provide a showroom for products in the Bina Desa office
- Design improved leaflets, catalogs, and packaging for the BDC's products like organic rice, honey, and other products
- Use programs like Spreadsheet for the administration of the BDC (like for supplier data, buyer data, product stocks, invoices, monthly financial reports, etc.)
- ❖ Bina Desa believes that, aside from business and industry, IT is also pivotal for education, and helps eradicate a social structure based on inequality. Bina Desa has taken the initiative to use its website as a tool to assist small farmers and beneficiaries. Bina Desa has been working with its IT Specialist Mr. Fuad Bahari (trained by it@coops) in developing and improving its website.

Huaykhanang-Tungna Credit Union

Uthaitхани Province, Thailand

- Operates in Nongchang, Banrai, Huaykot, Lansak and Tabtan districts of Uthaitхани
- Members are farmers (44.92%), merchants (21.71%), hired employees (22.68%), government employees (7.41%) and others (3.28%)
- Services to co-op members: share accumulation; savings; credit (emergency, regular, special loans)
 - ❖ loan products: 1) special project loan (occupational loan); 2) specific objective loan (health treatment; house restoration; new home/land; agricultural supplies/instruments; computer; educational; computer; educational; electrical instruments; and vehicle loans)
- Also offers the following welfare services to members: cremation; natural disaster relief; health treatment; new birth; old age; scholarship; wedding welfare.
- To cover all aspects of service, the Huaykhanang-Tungna Credit Union develops other support services to meet the members' varying needs:
 - ❖ The IT/BDC Center
 - Has showrooms and sells products of members and of other organizations (these are also the items needed by members): processed food, baskets, souvenir items, clothes, home appliances, other items. Also for information exchange among members and other organizations.
 - Offers counter service for accepting payments for telephone bills, money transfer/debt repayment; Thailand tour reservations; photocopy; facsimile; business card design and printing; computer training service center; Internet café with 10 personal computers
 - Has IT training program for co-op board, members, advisors, inspectors, staff; other organizations; students in operational areas; children of members; other interested people. Training modules: introduction to computers, to e-mail, to Internet; MS Office; Photoshop; training for trainers; software installation and hardware maintenance; website development.



❖ Occupational Promotion

The Huaykhanang-Tungna Credit Union promotes extra jobs for members by gathering at least 10 members to set up an occupational club such as poultry raisers club, sewers club, industrial technician club, vegetable growers club, etc., and Credit Union supports them in three 3 aspects:

- Technical skill: experts are invited according to members' needs
- Capital: capital is mobilized for members who submit projects and budget proposals
- Market : coordinates with members in finding out new markets, both domestic and international.

The Credit Union supports both agricultural sector and non-agricultural sector to cover members at all levels.

- The Credit Union board, staff, and members support the IT training, especially as led by the Credit Union Manager and IT Specialist Mr. Thanom Poolsri (trained by it@coops). They know that the IT training program is very important to lives and businesses.
- How do IT and the BDC benefit women-members? The women are able to widen their horizon by getting more and timely information that they need; are able to get better opportunities for employment and income, especially as being entrepreneurs with a wider market for their products, more money for investment and for business operation. Also, women's products get more help in terms of better packaging, better quality, improved promotional materials.

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