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Abstract: Conservation practices, which address resource degradation in the uplands, have been the focus of research agencies not only in the Philippines but also in countries with similar biophysical and socio-economic conditions. Contour hedgerow using leguminous species was the popular technology adopted and adapted by farmers, as these were promoted by agencies doing development and extension in the Philippine uplands. However, adoption of the hedgerow systems was slow for many reasons including: high labor and financial costs in the procurement of materials, establishment and maintenance of contour hedgerows, nutrient competition above and below ground between hedgerow species and the main crops, shading of the main crops, poor species adaptation and limited value-added benefits from the hedgerow pruning. It was recognized that the slow adaptation and adoption of the conventional hedgerow systems was not only due to some technical constraints, but also largely to the socio-economic and institutional constraints faced by poor upland farmers.

Natural Vegetative Strips (NVS) was recognized as a simple yet effective alternative hedgerow system that addresses the technical constraints identified in the conventional hedgerow practice. Aside from controlling more than 95% of the soil erosion, it minimized the cost of establishment and maintenance of the hedgerow, has minimal competitive relationship with the main crop, excellent species adaptation in all conditions and at the same time provides the foundation for farmers to evolve into more complex agroforestry systems and other perennials thus, improving total farm productivity and sustainability. With these factors built in the system, we now see a tremendous surge of adoption of this system, enhanced by a dissemination approach called “Landcare”.

Landcare addresses the socio-economic and institutional constraints brought about by the conventional extension of technological packages, in general. Landcare evolved into autonomous farmer-led organizations in partnership with and backstopping by the local government units and technical service providers. It delves on knowledge sharing towards profitable and sustainable agriculture and a holistic natural management. It is also referred as a participatory approach wherein technologies can be inexpensively and rapidly disseminated through the group and farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing methods. The approach has developed into a dynamic voluntary movement with more than 5000 members, actively involved in more than 250 farmer and community groups from five municipalities in the northern, central and eastern Mindanao.

Local governments units provide the needed support through policy incentives and funding for training and implementation of projects. Farmers provide their counterpart through labor, time, low-cost materials and commitment while, technical people assure that necessary knowledge, technical know-how and skills in facilitating group formation and development and networking for possible external support are available. From the initial household and farm-levels activities, like the adoption of soil and water

conservation and agroforestry technologies, Landcare groups have now evolved into a multi-faceted, vision oriented organizations that tackle issues beyond their comfort-zone, out to the larger context of the community. Stream rehabilitation, riparian buffer zone stabilization, water watch, education and training, income generating activities, policy advocacy and networking have become common activities of the groups. It encourages participation, cost sharing and co-management amongst the key players; the farming communities, the local government units and the technical service providers. The point of convergence is on improving the natural capital through feedback and support mechanisms that revolves around the key players. This forms the interdependence model in the development of Landcare. This relationship also reduces the costs of technology transfer through cost-sharing and network support.

From its humble beginning as knowledge-based farmer group, it evolved into a dynamic movement through an institution-building process that combines natural resource management knowledge and skills in decision-making and empowerment. The challenge to scale up Landcare in the whole Philippines is enormous, as NGOs, local governments and national government agencies have become interested in implementing Landcare in their sites. However, we are mindful that Landcare maintain its culture as a demand-driven process, inclusive to a range of issues that communities aim to tackle. The fundamental elements in the phenomenal success of Landcare lies heavily in its quest to implement appropriate technologies and develop partnership in institution building.