

## FEATURE STORY

## Agoo, La Union: UNESCO awardee for advancing literacy

“LITERACY IS POWER, and sharing it to our least and uneducated brothers and sisters to improve their well being, is the highest form of generosity.”

This is the driving force behind the local government unit of Agoo’s continuous work to promote literacy among its people.

Just recently, UNESCO awarded the Literacy, Continuing Education and Lifelong Program of the Municipality of Agoo, La Union with the prestigious Confucius Prizes for Literacy.

The ceremony was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris last recently. The Confucius Prize for Literacy comprises a silver medal, a diploma, and a cash prize worth US \$20,000.

Every year, UNESCO calls for nominations for its International Literacy Prizes. These awards are given to individuals, governments or governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations as recognition to their effective practices and successful results in the field of literacy throughout the world.

This year, in relation to the theme “Literacy and Empowerment”, UNESCO awarded the Confucius Prize for Literacy to Agoo to reward well-established and innovative practices (basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy) contribute to empowerment of people.

“The program perfectly identified the learning needs of the community and then provided the appropriate solutions and learning environments that eventually equipped the people with skills that improved their lives,” Department of Education Secretary Jesli Lapus said.

The Literacy Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning Program of Agoo has been a constant recipient of the National Literacy Awards sponsored by the Department of Education Literacy Coordinating Council (LCC) of the Philippines. The success of the program is credited to the local government unit of Agoo led by Mayor Sandra Eriguel. “Our efforts are focused at eliminating illiteracy and sustaining lifelong learning in all of our 49 villages,” Eriguel said.

Partnership with various government agencies like the DepEd, Technical Skills and Development Authority, Department of Health, non-government organizations, and civic groups is also very critical in achieving our targets,” she stressed.

But the work is never easy. Since its conception in 1998 through the efforts of then Agoo Mayor Eufraño Eriguel, the project had to hurdle challenges. Lack of funds and resources were the project’s main problems. The people’s lack of

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education and training also became a hindrance in the execution of the project. However, these obstacles did not keep the program from achieving its goals.

Based on the need assessment, the organizers came up with various activities that would address the problems. For Basic Literacy, various professionals are invited to talk about topics within their specific fields that concern the public. Under the Continuing Education, computer literacy program is offered to public school teachers, local government employees, and other community people. On the other hand, livelihood skills such as soap making and modern farming are taught to residents under the Lifelong learning aspect of the program.

To date, around 50% of the identified illiterates in Agoo are now considered functionally literate. More school teachers (264), local government employees, and community people (131 in four barangays) have acquired basic computer skills. Some of the 980 out- of- school youths and elders who passed the Accreditation and Equivalency test are now enrolled in higher level of formal education. Furthermore, soft loans with no interest are provided to livelihood skills completers for their business initiatives.

A success story like this is worth replicating. “I do hope that this little work of ours will inspire others to be more committed in literacy efforts. We must continue to give people opportunities to discover the best in them. Literacy is an unfinished concern – a concern that never ends for all of us who recognize what it is like to be illiterate,” Eriguel stressed.

Meanwhile, LCC head Norma Salcedo said “the national campaign against literacy is built on the concept of grand alliance among the public education sector, the private sector, and the local government unit. The local authorities take full leadership and responsibility to make the program sustainable. The Council is set to review and evaluate its program, and hopefully, take it to the next level of advocacy – total government involvement.”

LCC is the lead agency tasked to formulate policies and coordinate national efforts towards the development of literacy skills for lifelong learning in a global society/community. The agency is committed to create and maintain an environment for the universalization of literacy towards the attainment of literate Philippines.

Other recipients of the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes 2009 for the Confucius Prize for Literacy were Pashai Language Development Project implemented by a British NGO, SERVE Afghanistan, and Non-Formal and Continuing Education Programme of the Ministry of Education of Bhutan.

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