



## In the throes of poverty and child labor, a mother finds hope

*As we continue to celebrate women's month, we feature the story of a mother, who, despite the lure of allowing her young children to work in exchange for a few pesos to augment the family income, has come out an empowered woman through the help of the DOLE.*

*Read on and join Mila as she journeys through life as worker, leader, entrepreneur and most importantly... **MOTHER.***

During harvest season, tobacco farmers do not only get to bring home their produce, which they can sell for a little cash, but they also get to "harvest" illnesses like cough, rhinitis, or even asthma. The tobacco fields where these farmers work, unfortunately, serve as workplaces for hundreds of children too.

Mila Calleja used to send her children to help in the tobacco fields. Like most tobacco farmers, she had no choice but to let her children work at an early age because of poverty. But despite this, she has one goal in mind, that is, to be able to send her children to school so that their life will improve.

Four years ago, this aspiration would have seemed nothing but a mirage of her distressed mind. Now, it seems so close at hand. Her dream to salvage her

children from child labor due to poverty was what drove and still drives her now.

Confined to her world at home and in the fields, Mila came out of her shell and discovered a world of opportunities through DOLE RO I's Eliminating Child Labor in the Tobacco Industry (ECLTI) Project Phase I, wherein she was selected as one of the 100 parent-beneficiaries of alternative livelihood assistance. Likewise, her children were chosen among the 100 beneficiaries of the educational assistance under the said Project. Mila was elected as the President of the Balaoan ECLTI Beneficiary Association of La Union (BEBALU) which was awarded with One Hundred Thousand Pesos (P100,000.00) seed capital to finance their Goat Raising Project, with counterpart funding coming from the Local Government Unit of Balaoan and the Provincial Government of La Union.

The ECLTI Project paved the way for her and the rest of the group to acquire skills on livestock management, strategies and innovations for them to improve their livelihood. With the theories Mila acquired during the Farmers' Livestock Training and the Artificial Insemination Training, she is ready to take greater responsibilities and put all those theories into practice.

Soon enough, Mila learned how to manage their business and eventually made it prosper.



*Left photo: Mila Calleja delivering her thanksgiving speech during the World Day Against Child Labor (WDACL) Celebration held on June 13, 2007. Right photo: Mila (center, in white shirt) and the rest of her team actively participating during the Artificial Insemination Training held last November 26-28, 2007 in Pantar Sur, Balaoan, La Union.*

She and her group mates were able to generate income out of raising and selling goats and were able to send their children to school and buy school stuffs for them. She also became active in seeking out better ways to improve their goat raising business. Now, she has confidence in talking with local officials, coordinating with other government agencies, attending various seminars and is more vocal in requesting for assistance beneficial to BEBALU. As President of BEBALU, she acts as an emissary to resolve livestock-related problems whenever her neighbors are confronted with such. She also became a member of the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children in her barangay.

The good news is that Mila and the other parents no longer utilize their children in the to-

bacco farms, which is primarily the objective of the ECLTI project.

When asked about what she gained out of these experiences, Mila's unequivocal answer rings – the project had made her a better person, a dedicated leader, and a good provider.

With her steadfast resolve, Mila is likely to see her dream come true sooner than expected.

*(by Loida S. Tibayan, DOLE Regional Office No. I)*

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