NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

While new coconut trees mature, Filipinos learn to farm other crops

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Tanauan, Philippines

Typhoon Haiyan left little that Donabel Castillon could recognize of the land she farms with her family. The coconut trees were tall matchsticks with few, if any, branches left. Her small vegetable and rice fields were flooded out and the crops were ripped away.

The damage was so severe, Castillon told Catholic News Service, that she and her security guard husband, Robert, wondered if their family would struggle to have enough food to eat and more than just a few coconuts to sell to help make ends meet.

Three months later, Castillon was refocusing her small farming operation near Tanauan in eastern Leyte to grow watermelons, squash and beans in a cooperative effort with nearby farmers. The project will help put plenty of food on the table and provide extra produce to take to market and provide her family with much-needed financial income.

Under a program developed by Catholic Relief Services to protect the farm livelihoods of people severely affected by Haiyan, Castillon is planning to expand the amount of vegetables she grows for at least several years.

"What we lost from coconut farming is huge," Castillon said through a translator. "The vegetable project of CRS will help us in the short term."

The program is known as Cash for Asset Recovery, said Lionel Mendoza, agriculture program manager for CRS in the southern Philippines, who was called in to help kick-start the effort. He explained that CRS pays each farmer about $80 to prepare the same fields they lease where their coconut trees grow to produce other vegetables for up to 10 years. That's long enough for new trees to mature and begin producing the high-quality crop demanded by processors of much-in-demand coconut oil, Mendoza said.

The payment provides much-needed income at a time when the coconut sales have dropped to almost nothing, Mendoza explained.

"We're specifically targeting farmers whose livelihoods are specifically based in coconut farming, whether they are landowners, tenants, gatherers, laborers, everything that's connected with the coconut farming," he said.

The coconut oil is produced from copra, which is the dried meat, or kernel, of the coconut. The farmers dry the coconut meat before selling it to producers. The more coconuts they grow, the more copra they can produce.

Most coconut farmers also use the branches from the trees to make sturdy brooms. Some will make coconut wine, known locally as tuba.

Each farmer also receives vouchers that can be redeemed at participating businesses to purchase seed, fertilizer, boots and extra tools.

Only farmers who work plots of at least 2,150 square feet -- about 1/20 of an acre -- can participate in the program. About 130 farmers have joined the program, Mendoza said.

The program groups farmers into small clusters, usually about 10 to 15 in each. The farmers then can pool the cash received under the program in a cooperative arrangement to purchase additional seed and other needed materials. The cluster arrangement also allows farmers to help each other in preparing their fields for planting.

Castillon leads a cluster of eight farmers who lost their coconut trees to Haiyan's ferocity. A visit to her farm Friday found the eight digging up grasses by hand. One cluster member was using an ox to plow the field. This particular cluster received a donation of plastic sheeting to cover the long rows of rich soil and bake the roots and seeds of unwanted plants in the hot sun before planting the new crops.

Farmers have been able to learn about efficient ways to grow new crops at workshops led by the Philippine agriculture department. A CRS representative was on hand to explain its program at a workshop Feb. 1 so that farmers whose livelihoods are threatened could join.

Most farmers learned about the program from the barangay captain in their local communities. The captains suggested participants to CRS officials, who made the final decision of who met the basic criteria for enrollment.

Castillon and the other farmers in the cluster welcomed the chance to continue farming despite the loss of their coconut crop for the next several years.

"We will eat some (of what we grow), but there will be a surplus which we can sell to the market and earn some money from it," Castillon said.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/19/2014 - 23:27*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/while-new-coconut-trees-mature-filipinos-learn-farm-other-crops