

## Adequate holistic education in rural territories: the philippines' Family Farm Schools

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### Abstract

This presentation from the Philippines brought by the federation of Family Farm Schools named Pilipinas Associations of Rural Families for Education and Development (PARFED) contains experiences on the Alternance system spanning three decades of existence. It deals with the rationale or reason for existence, challenges and how we tried to overcome them, the advantages and benefits of the FFS system and the call to action to strengthen the FFS movement in the country. Due to the effectiveness of the FFS approach, a philanthropist who learned it from Spain brought it to the Philippines in 1988. The first FFS were established in Balete and Dagatan and soon spread to many places in the Philippines because of its relevance and practical benefits to the students, their families and communities. The character formation which is the foundational element of the system, the professional training and economic skills all complete the holistic development of the students. The personalized approach and link to social realities make the graduates of FFS schools well prepared for the next chapter of their lives as productive citizens in society. Establishing an FFS is a big challenge due to the high skills needed to implement the system, awareness raising among the people of the importance of such type of school as well as sustaining the costly operations of such system. Many of the FFS have closed due to the high cost of operating an FFS amidst the poverty of the students who cannot pay the cost. But we cannot just succumb to the difficulties because we believe in the good impact of FFS especially that this is a better option given the existing crisis in education that affects the public schools. Hence PARFED has embarked on a mission to find ways to sustain the FFS in the Philippines.

**Key words:** Alternance; Family Farm Schools; sustainable development; rural territories.

### 1. CEFFAs<sup>1</sup> existence in the Philippines

The experience on the Alternating Cycle Education System in the Philippines spans three decades of existence which is now under the Federation of Family Farm Schools, named Pilipinas Associations of Rural Families for Education and Development (PARFED). The following article aims to present the journey during these years of the Family Farm Schools, to expose some of the advantages of this system, as well as to show the challenges it had to face and how it was dealtwith in overcoming them.

<sup>1</sup> Centros Educativos Familiares de Formación por Alternancia (Family Educational Centers for Alternating Cycle Education) is the name given to all Alternating Cycle Education System centers in the world, due to the large number of different names.

The CEFFA concept, also named Family Farm Schools in the Philippines, first came to the Philippines in 1988 when a Filipino philanthropist named Fritz Gemperle brought it from his travel to Spain. He was so inspired by the effectiveness and relevance of CEFFA in holistic rural development, so he started two CEFFAs right away- Dagatan FFS and Balete FFS in the province of Batangas. When others learned about the CEFFA's effective approach and practical benefits to the students, their families, and communities, it spread across the country and became 17 CEFFAs in 2015. Hence, CEFFAs multiplied because there are people who have genuine concern to help uplift the communities in a relevant way. Usually, those who established their own CEFFA have strong connection with the Catholic church and involvement in humanitarian work.

## 2. Advantages and benefits of the FFS system

The CEFFA system is relevant, innovative, and effective which make it very attractive to development-oriented leaders who established their own CEFFAs. Given the gaps in educational system of our country, this system is an answer to address such need. Unlike the usual schools, it has a foundational framework anchored on character formation or citizenship. Sadly, character formation is not given as much emphasis by many schools nowadays. But in the CEFFA system, values formation is given premium. The character formation which is the foundational element of the system has specific emphasis in the curriculum (García-Marirrodriaga & Puig-Calvó, 2014). The products of CEFFAs are known to have good conduct, respectful to parents, concerned with the environment and involved in community development activities. Parents who want to enroll in CEFFAs say they choose our schools because of the personalized approach (González-García, 2020) and high quality of education. In short, a comprehensive training in which the human side of people is taken into account, emphasizing the soft skills.

The innovativeness of CEFFA system to implement learning in both academic as well as social realities make it effective and relevant. Experiential learning within their social milieu provides the student with strong foundation in relevant learning through visitations in local industries and being able to immerse in the situation of actual work environment like the farms, processing plants, marketplace, etc. The theme composition or social research create in the students the confidence to face different types of people even those in high position in the community (Sibonga, 2014). Being able to write about their experiences as part of knowledge generation and managing their time productively produce the confidence and life skills that are not taught by using just the books and lectures in the classrooms which are mere knowledge absorption following the banking system of education.

The personalized approach through regular chats with the students by the teachers (González-García & Gagnon, 2019) and family visitations create a sense of family atmosphere and concern for the over-all development of the student. The teachers are more grounded in the way they handle the students with customized manner of facilitating the learning process more substantially. Developing of the students' personal project like the enterprise project which also involves the family helps in augmenting the family's economic needs while also equipping them with entrepreneurial skills. Specific examples include cattle fattening, organic vegetable production and hog raising among others.

Feedback on the quality of our graduates include the following: they excel in college, they are mostly economically gainful and able to help much in their families' needs, they excel in their chosen field of expertise and have wider perspective in life.

### 3. Challenges encountered

Establishing a CEFFA is filled with challenges which goes with any high-quality endeavor. The following are the challenges we faced:

- Equipping teachers with skills in CEFFA system. We need to provide good training for the teachers and such training on CEFFA is not available anywhere. The existing college education available for the teachers does not have the formation contents needed in working in a CEFFA (Gutiérrez-Sierra, 2023). Mastery of the 4 pillars (Integral Youth Formation, Alternating Cycle, Responsible Association and Rural Development) (Puig-Calvó, 2006) and the rest of CEFFA pedagogy need to be developed in every staff of a CEFFA. It really takes much investment in time, money, and capabilities in training the CEFFA teachers.
- Financial difficulties. The high quality of education usually goes with high cost. Specially with problem in retaining the trained teachers with whom the schools have invested a lot, it is heart-breaking when teachers need to leave the CEFFA because their low salary cannot sustain their families' needs, although they love to work at CEFFA so much. There is no law yet that provides sufficient subsidy to CEFFA. The students are also usually from poor families and cannot afford to pay for the educational cost that can support the operations of a CEFFA. The schools need to purchase equipment like computers, books, etc. and maintain buildings and spend for various needs of operating such an institution in order to continue serving quality education and promote rural development.
- Low regard for agriculture and commercialism as cultural maladies. It is a common attitude among Filipino people to look down on agriculture. Hence the name "Family Farm School" bearing the term "Farm" does not attract many of the youth. This affects the promotion of the CEFFA. This is one big aspect of our struggle aside from the financial aspect. It is not easy to coax a student to study in the farm school, although there is a development that due to the quality of our education, there is a growing patronage. However, it is not yet enough. The advent of commercialism likewise affects the mindset of the youth with regards to their tendencies in choosing a school and adopting wholesome behaviors. The awareness level of the youth and families need to be raised so that they will understand the value of education at the CEFFA. There is still a lot to be done like marketing strategies, promotional activities, linkaging work with significant personalities and so on.
- Inadequate ability of certain CEFFAs to cope with the changing times. With the rapid changes brought by advent of various technologies and urbanization, the effects in the economic aspect, ecology and culture make it somewhat difficult for CEFFAs to adapt. In the case of CEFFAs of more than 30 years, the economic landscape of their community shifted considerably, and their farm schools find it hard to attract enrollees. Now they are having a crisis which forced them to reflect deeply and search for solutions.

### 4. Overcoming the challenges

There is a saying that "A CEFFA only closes when there is no more need for it, but never because of financial difficulties". Our main founder in one CEFFA had been struggling on how to financially support the operations of their 3-year-old CEFFA and plagued by growing loan. His team was feeling down due to the big problem on how to make their CEFFA survive. But this founder said

with much faith: “Do not look on the problems for it will make you weak, but look up to our goals-our guiding star which is the good that this school offers for the youth and their families and you will be strengthened”. And so powerful enough, that school lives till now and continues to grow on its 24<sup>th</sup> year.

Having the faith in the vision of the development that CEFFAs can create, closing is not an option when faced with great challenges. Instead, these challenges are considered as opportunities for growth. For innovating, for thinking out of the box and bringing out the best in each one. In the 3 decades of CEFFA in the Philippines, we can say that we have learned much and one of which is to keep finding ways to survive and sustain the CEFFAs. How we tried our best to overcome the big challenges we face include the following:

- Equipping teachers with skills in CEFFA system -Although there is a turnover of teachers due to exodus to public schools where salary is high, we learned to develop a way to make them stay, at least some of them. The helpful strategies are to develop scheme wherein if we cannot provide the same salary as the public schools, we are at least able to provide human resource development formation that addresses their need for well-being. We are able to do it because we have access to volunteer formators who can provide quality formation that motivates the teachers for higher needs rather than just on material things. The domino effect is that when we are able to keep the teachers for a longer time, the investment on their formation returns in the form of capabilities that they use in developing the students. This cycle of formation-and-improvement-of-commitment-to-serve contributes to the CEFFA's survival and sustainability through enough time for training the next generation of teachers in a smoother handing-down process.
- Financial difficulties. The following are our strategies in addressing financial challenges: a) Our ways of addressing this are through harnessing our network with the other CEFFAs and the AIMFR<sup>2</sup> in the lobbying work with our government. When the government notices that we are many and we have coverage at national and international level, there is a chance that they will hear us. Currently we are lobbying for the amendment of a law in order to include subsidy for the community-led private family farm schools like us. b) Another approach is through recruitment of students to achieve a feasible number of enrollees. This involves marketing skills to attract potential students. c) Harnessing our integrated or holistic rural development approach to highlight the crucial role of CEFFAs when making project proposals to local and international donors help in generating funds for our operations. For example, the teaching of climate-smart agriculture techniques generated funds for certain CEFFAs. Practice on well-being tools made a CEFFA eligible to a funding support.
- Low regard for agriculture and commercialism as cultural maladies. We are addressing this challenge through creative way of bringing out the appreciation of the students to agriculture like conducting school event with title: “Agri-cool-ture”, film showing, and other ways to present agriculture subject as palatable to the students. We quote from the practices in advanced countries who value agriculture well. We still have a lot to develop under this aspect.
- Inadequate ability of certain CEFFAs to cope with the changing times. This is a life-threatening experience for CEFFAs when they are unable to cope with the demands of the ever-changing times. It is like the CEFFA is pushed to a soul-searching experience which is essentially a difficult process that could only lead to two paths: the death or reborn. Since

<sup>2</sup> International Association of Family Movements for Rural Training ([www.aimfr.org](http://www.aimfr.org)) to which PARFED is associated.



this is still a new ground that has not been explored well, the CEFFAs undergoing it are in the stage of uncertainty. But along the process, there are opportunities emerging. Because of its common characteristics with the pedagogic system of the alternation and due to the strong adaptation to reality and the needs of professional actors the secondary school model of CEFFAs experiencing this are considering adopting the Dual Training/Post-secondary Vocational type of school and phase out the high school type (Crosas-Roura, 2024).

- Keeping the CEFFAs federation alive. By keeping afloat our federation of family farm schools, the Philipinas Association of Rural Families for Education and Development (PARFED), we are able to maintain coverage and then have a chance for leveraging. How we keep PARFED alive is a product of many sacrifices because at the individual, each CEFFA is already having a big struggle to survive. So, maintaining PARFED is an added work that can be a big load to the caretaker individual CEFFA which is the Gelacio I. Yason Foundation-Family Farm school (GIYF-FFS). But given the relatively rich experience and network of support of this CEFFA, the sacrifice can be absorbed. The rest is left to the Divine Providence with a combination of fervent prayers and hard work.

## 5. Strengthening the FFS movement

The Philippine CEFFAs are not at their best in their history, from 17 in 2015, it has been reduced to only 5 in 2023. But we are determined to recover. We cannot just succumb to the difficulties because we believe in the good impact of CEFFAs especially that this educational system provides a better option in the face of the educational crisis highlighted by the findings of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) research done by OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development).

We feel like this a tall order, but we have been used to facing great difficulties and being able to come through. As we always believe and practice- hard work and fervent prayers. It is meeting the corporal aspect with the spiritual aspect. As for the corporal aspect, we are poised to do and continue the following which will help the CEFFAs in the Philippines flourish and become strong as a contributor to sustainable rural development:

- Continue the lobbying efforts for government subsidy to community-led private CEFFAs. This shall be done through tapping of supportive networks of PARFED from local to international linkages.
- Maintain strong linkage with local and international support groups of CEFFAs. Partnership with Caritas Philippines has been started, and we will nurture it given the alignment of our goals with theirs. Active and strong network with AIMFR has been of big help in keeping PARFED surviving and allows the federation to access possible support through information sharing and linkage expansion. Actually, the idea of partnership building with Caritas Philippines is a result of the participation of PARFED in the AIMFR General Assembly in 2023 in Italy wherein the Pontifical Secretary advised us to partner with Caritas Philippines during a visit to her office in Rome. Also, a spin off from the General Assembly in Italy, Instituto CRIIA visited us this January and showed their commitment by accompanying us to different authorities and in partnership meeting with Caritas Philippines.

- Recruitment of new members. Getting new blood and expanding membership are enabling ways to strengthen the PARFED. Currently there are two applicants for membership, one is in Luzon region and another in Visayas region.

As we are writing this sharing of experiences, there are positive developments happening with PARFED that promise brighter future. We are optimistic that it will actually materialize because we got the enabling help of several entities, there are promising new members, we have a lot of enabling lessons learned, and we got the nurturing support of AIMFR family.

The Alternating Cycle Education System of CEFFAs is indeed a powerful tool in advancing the development of the youth consisting of young women and men equipping them to be productive citizens of their society. These youth belong to families where the formation of CEFFAs radiate to benefit and develop these families. These families make up the communities they live in and embody the formation of the Alternating System thus spreading the development in their territories. In this process of radiating the benefits of Alternating System from the students to their families to their communities, rural development is made possible.

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