

Facilitating Synergy in Establishing a Caritas Demo Farm for Youth Servant Leadership and Education Program for Agri-Scholars

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This research provides a thorough needs assessment for the proposed Caritas Agroforestry Eco-Demo Farm, which is intended to benefit Agriculture Scholars in the Youth Servant Leadership and Education Program (YSLEP). Caritas Manila, Inc., a renowned Catholic Church-affiliated nonprofit organization, is dedicated to addressing social welfare issues and poverty reduction in the Philippines. Central Philippines State University (CPSU) has collaborated with Caritas on this significant project to further its mission of providing accessible, high-quality education.

Objectives: This research looks into the creation of the Caritas Demo Farm, with a primary focus on agricultural education and community development. The research objectives included clarifying roles and responsibilities, identifying and mitigating challenges, assessing sustainability prospects, and making recommendations for similar initiatives.

Methods: The Caritas Manila, Inc., the Diocese of Kabankalan, and CPSU held a focused group discussion (FGD) to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the specific needs and services required for this collaborative endeavor.

Results: Key findings highlight the central theme of Collaborative Partnership, emphasizing all stakeholders' unwavering commitment to empowering youth in agriculture. The vision of CARITAS Manila, Inc. to produce 1,000 agriculture graduates and provide scholarships highlights the critical importance of Educational Empowerment. Inclusion in Education broadens opportunities for students pursuing related programs, while rigorous Scholar Selection and Screening processes ensure excellence. Timely Academic Support is critical for scholar success. Environmental Sustainability is prioritized, with the project contributing to food security and environmental protection. Sustainable practices such as soil testing, agroforestry development, and irrigation systems demonstrate the project's dedication to environmental stewardship.

Conclusions: The role of technology and expertise in effectively addressing challenges is critical. Recommendations include formalizing partnerships through Memoranda of Agreement (MOAs), enhancing scholar support, broadening scholarship opportunities, maximizing practical learning experiences, emphasizing environmental sustainability, integrating technology, and preparing future agricultural consultants. In conclusion, this study offers vital insights into the collaborative establishment of the Caritas Demo Farm, providing a well-defined roadmap for agricultural education, sustainability, and community development. The partnership exemplifies a resolute commitment to empowering youth and addressing pressing agricultural challenges, with the potential to catalyze positive change in the sector and beyond.

Keywords: Partnership, Agricultural Education, Sustainability, Scholar Support

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration stands as a fundamental force in the unwavering quest for sustainable agriculture and enhanced socioeconomic well-being, acting as a catalyst that drives progress beyond the limitations of individual efforts. This initiative provides a unique opportunity to unite across disciplines and embark on a collective journey toward holistic empowerment, underpinned by a vision for a brighter tomorrow—embodied in the "Caritas Demo Farm" project.

This project seeks to harness innovative determination, meticulously designed to foster transformation among a distinct group of individuals—specifically, the Agri-Scholars from Central Philippines State University who qualify for the Youth Servant Leadership and Education Program (YSLEP).

At the heart of this endeavor is the synergy between Caritas Manila, Inc., a distinguished nonprofit organization dedicated to compassion and community service, and the academic rigor and commitment of Central Philippines State University. Together, they are poised to make a meaningful impact on environmental sustainability, agricultural practices, and social welfare.

Furthermore, the various dimensions of this collaborative effort were explored, including its core objectives, methodologies, and the anticipated positive outcomes. The goal is to illuminate the significant potential within the "Caritas Demo Farm" to empower Agri-Scholars, equipping them to transcend their roles as mere custodians of the land, transforming them into advocates for a sustainable, progressive, and equitable future.

This initiative exemplifies the transformative power of collaboration—a harmonious blend of ideas and actions working in concert to effectuate positive change. Its influence will extend beyond the confines of Central Philippines State University, resonating throughout the wider community as a beacon of progress and a commitment to a better future for all.

OBJECTIVES

The study titled "Facilitating Synergy in Establishing a Caritas Demo Farm for YSLEP Agri-Scholars" focused on exploring the collaborative processes and stakeholder interactions involved in the creation of the Caritas Demo Farm. Its primary goals included analyzing how effective collaboration can be organized, assessing management strategies for sustainability and operational efficiency, and identifying the critical factors that influence the success of the initiative. By understanding these dynamics, the research sought to enhance the practical and academic development of the YSLEP Agri-Scholars, ensuring they gain the necessary skills for a career in sustainable agriculture.

Furthermore, the research aimed to promote inclusive and sustainable agricultural practices by fostering a culture of environmental stewardship among future agricultural leaders. By evaluating the impact of the collaborative effort on the Agri-Scholars' educational experiences, the study aspired to provide valuable insights that can influence the development of similar initiatives in agricultural education and community-focused practices. Ultimately, the findings are intended to contribute to the effectiveness and longevity of the Caritas Demo Farm, benefiting both the scholars and the broader agricultural community.

METHODS

The theoretical framework guiding the "Facilitating Synergy in Establishing a Caritas Demo Farm for YSLEP Agri-Scholars" project is built upon several foundational concepts and theoretical perspectives that provide insight into the project's dynamics and potential outcomes. At its core, the Social Capital Theory highlights the value of social networks and relationships, emphasizing the importance of fostering collaborative partnerships between Caritas Manila, Inc., the Diocese of Kabankalan, and Central Philippines State University. This collaboration enhances the project's objectives and enriches the opportunities available for YSLEP Agri-Scholars. The Sustainable Agriculture Framework underlines the commitment to environmentally responsible practices that support biodiversity, conserve natural resources, and ensure food security. Additionally, Collaborative Leadership Theory promotes shared decision-making and equitable distribution of responsibilities among diverse stakeholders, fostering an environment conducive to the project's success. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) informs the design of educational initiatives aimed at equipping Agri-Scholars with the knowledge necessary to promote sustainable agricultural

practices, while Empowerment Theory focuses on positioning these scholars as agents of positive change in their communities.

To identify the specific needs and technical support required from our partner institutions, a comprehensive needs assessment was conducted through a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) on December 13, 2022, at the Nuestra Senora de Candelaria Chaplaincy Convent. The initial phase of this discussion revealed CARITAS Manila, Inc.'s commitment to producing 1,000 agriculture graduates and providing scholarships to 30 qualified applicants, highlighting their dedication to empowering future scholars while seeking alignment with the Diocese of Kabankalan for a broader educational reach. The second phase affirmed the appropriateness of the designated demo farm site, which aims to serve as a practical learning hub for scholars' thesis and research projects. In the final phase, discussions centered around the site's unique characteristics, including hilly terrain and forested areas, prompting suggestions for comprehensive surveying and innovative agricultural techniques such as agroforestry. The project also identified the necessity for soil testing, irrigation planning, and plans to leverage CPSU's expertise in solar energy to enhance sustainability. Overall, this collaborative needs assessment underscores the project's commitment to excellence, sustainability, and holistic empowerment for YSLEP Agri-Scholars and the broader community.

RESULTS

Upon reviewing the Focused Group Discussion, several themes have emerged based on the project objectives.

Roles and responsibilities of Caritas Manila, Inc., the Diocese of Kabankalan, and Central Philippines State University in the collaborative establishment of the demo farm.

General theme: Unified Commitment to Collaboration and Social Responsibility

Sub-Themes:

1. *Collaborative Partnership*: All three organizations came together in a collaborative partnership to establish the demo farm, emphasizing the importance of working together towards a common goal.
2. *Social Welfare Arm*: Caritas Manila, Inc. and the Diocese of Kabankalan were identified as advocates for social welfare, aligning their roles with the broader mission of the Catholic Church in promoting social justice and inclusivity.
3. *Partnership Formalization*: The theme of formalizing the partnership through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was recognized as essential to clarify roles and responsibilities.

The establishment of the demo farm reflects a unified commitment among Caritas Manila, Inc., the Diocese of Kabankalan, and Central Philippines State University, emphasizing the significance of collaborative partnerships aimed at achieving a shared vision. Within this partnership, Caritas Manila, Inc. and the Diocese of Kabankalan play essential roles as advocates for social welfare, aligning their efforts with the Catholic Church's mission to advance social justice and inclusivity. Furthermore, the formalization of their roles through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) is essential for clarifying responsibilities, ensuring effective collaboration, and enhancing the overall impact of the initiative.

Perceived challenges and barriers in the establishment of the Caritas Demo Farm

General theme: Navigating Challenges Through Strategic Support and Collaboration

Sub-Themes:

1. *Scholar Selection and Screening*: The rigorous process of selecting qualified scholars was highlighted as a crucial step to ensure the success of the project.
2. *Academic Support*: Ensuring academic support and timely grade submission was emphasized to prevent scholars' disqualification.
3. *Technology and Expertise*: The theme of utilizing technology and involving experts in data analysis and agricultural practices to address project challenges.
4. *Partnership Formalization*: Again, the importance of formalizing partnerships through an MOA was identified as a means to address potential challenges.

The establishment of the Caritas Demo Farm highlights the necessity of navigating various challenges through strategic support and collaboration. Key to this process is the meticulous selection and screening of qualified scholars, which serves as a foundational step toward the initiative's success. The provision of academic support mechanisms and the emphasis on timely grade submissions are critical in preventing disqualification and ensuring scholars remain engaged. Furthermore, leveraging technology and expert involvement in data analysis and agricultural practices play an essential role in addressing obstacles effectively. The formalization of partnerships through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) underscores the importance of clearly defined roles and commitments, enabling all stakeholders to collaboratively overcome challenges faced during the project's implementation.

Analysis of sustainability and long-term prospects of the collaborative endeavor in promoting agricultural education and sustainable practices

General theme:Future Consultants

Sub-Themes:

1. *Educational Empowerment*: The project's focus on education as a means to address human resource needs in agriculture was central to its sustainability.
2. *Inclusivity in Education*: The project aimed to be inclusive, offering educational opportunities not just to agriculture students but to those pursuing related programs, promoting diversity and access.
3. *Practical Learning*: The commitment to practical learning and hands-on experience was recognized as a key factor in sustaining agricultural education.
4. *Environmental Sustainability*: The project's emphasis on addressing environmental concerns through sustainable agricultural practices and environmental initiatives.

Preparing scholars for future roles as agricultural consultants underscored the long-term impact and sustainability of the project. Fostering Long-Term Sustainability Through Empowerment and Inclusivity in Agricultural Education. The collaborative endeavor aims to foster long-term sustainability by prioritizing empowerment and inclusivity in agricultural education. Central to this mission is the focus on educational empowerment, which addresses the agricultural sector's human resource challenges and lays the groundwork for sustainable development. The initiative is committed to providing inclusive educational opportunities that extend beyond agriculture students to encompass related disciplines, thereby promoting diversity and accessibility in learning. A strong emphasis on practical learning and hands-on experiences further strengthens the educational foundation, ensuring that scholars gain relevant skills for the workforce. Additionally, integrating environmental considerations into sustainable agricultural practices reflects the project's commitment to ecological stewardship. By preparing scholars for future roles as agricultural consultants, the initiative underscores its dedication to creating a lasting impact on both the individuals involved and the broader agricultural community.

Recommendations for enhancing synergy, effectiveness, and sustainability in similar collaborative projects within the field of agricultural education and community development

General Theme: Enhancing Collaborative Effectiveness and Sustainability through Strong Partnerships and Strategic Initiatives

Sub-Themes:

1. *Collaborative Partnership*: Recommendations may emphasize the importance of establishing strong collaborative partnerships as a foundation for success.
2. *Scholarship Opportunities*: Recommending the provision of scholarship opportunities to empower future generations in the field of agriculture.
3. *Technology and Expertise*: Encouraging the use of technology and the involvement of experts to address challenges effectively.
4. *Environmental Sustainability*: Promoting sustainable practices in similar projects to address environmental concerns.
5. *Partnership Formalization*: Recommending the formalization of partnerships through clear agreements to ensure commitment and accountability.
6. *Future Consultants*: Highlighting the importance of preparing scholars for future leadership roles within the agricultural sector.

To enhance synergy, effectiveness, and sustainability in agricultural education and community development, it is essential to establish strong collaborative partnerships that serve as a foundation for project success. Empowering future generations through scholarship opportunities is paramount for nurturing the next wave of leaders in the agricultural sector. Integrating technology and expert insights can significantly improve problem-solving capabilities, enabling collaborative projects to address challenges more effectively. Additionally, promoting environmental sustainability through best practices is vital for creating initiatives that are both impactful and responsible. The formalization of partnership agreements ensures commitment and accountability among stakeholders, further strengthening collaboration. Finally, focusing on preparing scholars for future leadership roles within the agricultural field is crucial for the long-term development and resilience of the sector, fostering a new generation of agricultural leaders equipped to tackle emerging challenges.

DISCUSSION

Unified Commitment to Collaboration and Social Responsibility

Results of the discussion came up into a common idea of establishing a collaborative partnerships as it has been identified as a key factor in the success of social initiatives, especially in the context of agricultural education and community development. According to Torres and Rojas (2023), effective partnerships that emphasize shared goals and mutual responsibilities contribute significantly to fostering community engagement and promoting social welfare. Such collaborative efforts also align with the mission of organizations that advocate for social justice and inclusivity, as seen in the case of Caritas Manila, Inc. and the Diocese of Kabankalan.

Moreover, in the context of the University as emphasized by the Program head of the Social Science Division of the College of Arts and Sciences present in the discussion, a legal document is needed before any collaboration with possible partners. In this venture, the creation of formal agreements, such as Memorandums of Agreement (MOA), has been agreed to clarify roles and strengthen partnerships among the groups. A study by Mendoza et al. (2024) emphasizes that formalizing partnerships through documented agreements not only enhances accountability but also facilitates smoother collaboration by delineating the responsibilities of each participant. This formal structure ensures that all stakeholders are aligned with the project's objectives, leading to a more organized approach in achieving desired outcomes.

Additionally, the focus on social responsibility within collaborative frameworks can significantly enhance the impact of community projects. Organizations like Caritas play a crucial role in advocating for social welfare by integrating community needs into their mission. Their advocacy efforts are aligned with broader movements aimed at addressing inequality and fostering inclusivity, which are essential for sustainable development in agricultural education (Santos & Ledesma, 2023).

This implies that establishing collaborative partnerships, formalizing roles through agreements, and maintaining a focus on social responsibility collectively enhance the efficacy and impact of initiatives like the Caritas Demo Farm. This approach not only guides organizational practices but also ensures alignment with the overarching goals of promoting social justice and inclusivity within agricultural education and community development.

Navigating Challenges Through Strategic Support and Collaboration

The successful implementation of initiatives such as the Caritas Demo Farm often reveals challenges that require strategic support and collaborative efforts. According to Garcia and Chan (2023), the vetting and selection process for participants in educational projects is critical to ensuring the quality and commitment of those involved. During the discussion, a thorough selection and screening process was emphasized and fosters a motivated group capable of realizing the project's objectives. This process of selection was decided to be joint with the Caritas and the Scholarship Office of the institution. Such foundational steps are vital, as they directly impact engagement and retention among scholars.

Moreover, academic support structures play a significant role in maintaining scholar engagement and preventing disqualification due to unmet academic requirements. There is already an existing scholars sponsored by Caritas Manila in the University. One of the problems met was the late submission of certificates of grades of scholars from

the school. This concern should be properly addressed to avoid suspension of release of financial assistance to the scholars or worst, disqualification. Research by Rivero and Alcantara (2022) indicates that tailored academic support programs can significantly enhance student retention and success in educational settings, particularly in complex projects that require high levels of commitment. Their findings suggest that effective support mechanisms ensure that scholars remain focused and engaged, which is fundamental for the initiative's long-term viability.

The integration of technology and expert involvement also emerges as a critical factor in overcoming potential challenges during project execution. It is in this part that different colleges of the universities should get involved based on the needs of the proposed project. The expertise of the faculty of Central Philippines State University shall be shared to the community. As noted by Lim and Perez (2024), leveraging technological tools and expertise can enhance data management, facilitate better decision-making, and improve project outcomes. Their study highlights that technology not only aids in addressing logistical hurdles but also promotes innovative practices that can streamline operations within educational projects.

Lastly, the establishment of formal partnerships through Memorandums of Agreement (MOAs) is crucial for providing clarity and structure in collaborative efforts. According to Reyes et al. (2021), formalizing roles and responsibilities through MOAs enhances accountability and ensures that all stakeholders are aligned in their objectives. This formal structure is integral in fostering collaboration and enabling stakeholders to navigate obstacles collectively (Reyes et al., 2021). The importance of strategic support, comprehensive selection processes, academic support mechanisms, technological integration, and formalized partnerships in effectively navigating the challenges associated with collaborative educational initiatives were underscored.

Fostering Long-Term Sustainability Through Empowerment and Inclusivity in Agricultural Education

Results emphasized the long-term sustainability through educational empowerment and inclusivity in agricultural education. The Caritas Manila highlighted the need of the scholars to undergo formation during the whole duration of the scholarship. Along with their actual practice in the demo-farm, there will be scheduled formation that they are going to attend. Providing targeted education does not only equips the scholars with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute effectively to sustainable agricultural practices but also a support to overall sector development. This is in conformity to the study of Watson and Kennedy (2021), which states that educational empowerment is crucial in addressing the skills gap in the agricultural sector, particularly in developing regions.

On the other hand, inclusivity in education is another essential aspect that arises in the discussion. The group agreed that this fosters diversity and broader access to learning opportunities. As a result, the scholarship coordinator of the university suggested to open the scholarship to applicants who are not members of the Catholic community, which the Caritas Manila agreed as it is the current policy of the organization. Also, the head of the scholarship desk of the Diocese of Kabankalan gave his approval to the suggestion as this act aligns with the role of the Church in the community. Furthermore, it was agreed that inclusion of all agriculture-related courses shall be included in the criteria so that the project can reach out to a wider group of students in the institution. A study by Anaya et al. (2023) highlights the importance of creating educational pathways that are accessible not just for agriculture students but also for those in related fields such as environmental science and agribusiness. This approach not only enriches the educational experience but also cultivates a more varied skill set among graduates, enhancing their employability and adaptability in a changing job market.

Practical learning and hands-on experiences are also critical in preparing students for real-world challenges in agriculture. Research by Thompson and Ruiz (2022) underscores the value of experiential learning in agricultural education, noting that students who engage in practical applications of their knowledge are better equipped to meet industry demands. This hands-on approach not only strengthens understanding but also fosters innovative thinking and problem-solving abilities essential for future careers in agriculture. Moreover, integrating environmental considerations into educational practices contributes to a commitment to ecological stewardship. Sustainable agricultural education programs should emphasize environmental responsibility as critical for ensuring long-term sustainability. A research indicates that such programs encourage students to consider the ecological impacts of agriculture, equipping them with the tools to implement sustainable practices in their future careers (Cardenas & Lopez, 2024).

Finally, the focus of the Caritas Manila, Diocese of Kabankalan and the Central Philippines State University on preparing scholars to become agricultural consultants aligns with the need for skilled professionals who can drive innovative solutions within the agricultural community. According to Lee et al. (2023), equipping graduates with the necessary skills to become consultants is essential for fostering a knowledgeable workforce capable of addressing current and future challenges in the agricultural sector. This conforms with the mission and vision of the Church being represented.

Enhancing Collaborative Effectiveness and Sustainability through Strong Partnerships and Strategic Initiatives

Results of the discussion highlighted the establishment of collaborative partnerships as it is viewed to be crucial for enhancing the synergy, effectiveness, and sustainability of agricultural education and community development initiatives. The group came up into a common perspective that when stakeholders come together, they create a more cohesive approach to addressing agricultural challenges. This assertion of demonstrating how collaborative frameworks can lead to more impactful outcomes in various projects is in conformity with the findings of the study of Brown and Zhao (2022), which states that strong collaborative partnerships among educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and local governments significantly contribute to the success of agricultural initiatives by leveraging diverse resources, expertise, and perspectives.

Likewise, the scholarship coordinator emphasizes that empowering future generations through scholarship opportunities. According to her, this has been identified by her office as a key strategy for cultivating the next generation of agricultural leaders. Many researches will support this observation and of these researches is by Martinez et al. (2023) which results highlighted the importance of providing financial support to students as a means of fostering their engagement and commitment to the agricultural sector. The authors argue that scholarship programs not only alleviate financial burdens but also encourage students to pursue careers in agriculture, which is essential for addressing future workforce needs.

On the other hand, incorporating technology and expert insights into collaborative projects enhances problem-solving capabilities, a critical factor in today's fast-evolving agricultural landscape. It is in this aspect where the expertise of the faculty and the services of the different colleges of the University will come in. One of the faculty present in the focused group discussion suggested ways on how different colleges of the University can share its expertise into the demo farm and how technology can be transferred to it and even to the community surrounding the demo farm in the future. Integrating technology into the proposed demo-farm will foster a culture of innovation that can address complex challenges in agriculture. A study by Lee and Chen (2024) emphasizes the transformative power of technology in agricultural education, illustrating how digital tools and expert collaboration significantly improve project outcomes by facilitating better data analysis and innovative practices.

Promoting environmental sustainability through best practices is vital to ensuring the long-term impact of agricultural initiatives. Sustainable agricultural practices are not only necessary for ecological health but also for maintaining community support and engagement (Thompson & Green, 2021). Their work advocates for the implementation of environmentally friendly methodologies as a core component of agricultural education programs which aligned to the advocacies of the University, the Caritas Manila and the of the Diocese of Kabankalan. The role of formalized partnership agreements in fostering accountability and commitment among stakeholders is also well documented. In a comprehensive review, Wright and Patel (2023) discuss how written agreements clarify roles and responsibilities, ensuring that all parties are aligned with project goals (Wright & Patel, 2023). Their findings indicate that formal agreements enhance collaborative efforts and reduce the ambiguity that can hinder project success.

Finally, preparing scholars for future leadership roles in agriculture is crucial for the sector's resilience and development. Research by Nguyen and Gomez (2022) highlights the importance of leadership training in agricultural education, suggesting that instilling leadership skills in students is essential for addressing emerging challenges in the field (Nguyen & Gomez, 2022). This focus not only prepares graduates to take on significant roles within the agricultural community but also helps ensure the sustainability and growth of the sector.

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