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Pansig'dan: Promoting Well-being
in an Agricultural Community in Northern Luzon, Philippines



UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE
in the Context of Cash Crop Farming

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Understanding Suicide in the Context of Cash Crop Farming

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FOR ETHICAL REASONS, the name of the community has been deliberately dropped. This should be observed at all times when citing and quoting any part of this report. Most of the photographs used were taken from the different vegetable farming communities of Benguet. Pesticides mentioned were listed according to their chemical names.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The journey of understanding the complexities of suicide phenomenon in a chemical based rural farming community has brought so much reflexivity. The project team clearly remembers the experience of approaching a phenomenon that initially brought numbing silence, discomfort and fear. But as students of the social world, this action research has to be pursued.

The project is an exploration of how a commercial farming community presents itself as a landscape for decisions and choices. It also tried to understand the manifest problem of suicide and the recent alarming suicide incidents in the study site. Using focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and informal discussions, the research team consisting several disciplinary lenses tried to discern the respondent's notions of suicide and to understand the context and the meanings linked to particular interactions taking place.

Profile of suicide cases show that victims are relatively young, ranging from ages 15 to 24; 73% of them are males. There are 52 suicide cases counted starting from the first case in 1961 up to the last case recorded in 2010. Almost all of these cases were committed using pesticides. A suicide cluster was observed in 2008-2010 registering 38 deaths, 12 of which is caused by paraquat, 10 by pyrethroid and eight by organophosphate.

Results also show that self-inflicted injuries usually happen when the victims are under the influence of alcohol. However, on why these acts were committed, findings reveal that chemical-based farming with all its pesticide use, disposal, management as well as the dependency to "modern" technologies has been shaping the farmer's character of everyday transactions. The labor demands as well as the desire to hit the "jackpot" price make farming households slave to their gardens-and many times at the expense of personal leisure and relationships. This condition has to be understood in the context of farming communities that have limited access to balanced information on alternative technologies and education materials that are needed in self-determining decisions.

On the surface, the reasons of self-inflicted injuries range from being scolded, being frustrated with love, being teased, having dreams of the dead, family misunderstanding to name a few, but closer examinations reveal that there are suicide correlates interacting together. Person-level and rational issues are usually reinforced by the person's environment such as the presence of enabling factors.

The multiplicity of conditions such as the predisposing, reinforcing and enabling factors have been implicated. Predisposing factors emanate from the market-oriented economy and the loss of socialization support coupled with stressors and learned helplessness. The condition of producing for the market created a lifestyle that is in accordance with market demands. Since parents have to always catch-up with farm work, their time poverty robs the younger members of the family that needed care and attention. Teenagers are left to tend their own emotional conditions which cause them to turn to their peers resulting to complex outcomes.

Reinforcing factors to include the quality of interaction that one has in the family, peer group and the larger community may shape social behaviors, too. In the larger environment, the "bite" of satirical humor, locally called *toknang* can serve as an avenue for self expression although it can also have dangerous implications. The contagion effect or the *ginnuyyod* has also been marked socially with the young imitating the others who have committed suicide. All these have to be understood in the context of grief and bereavement which, if not properly processed, can result to self-harm.

Enabling factors such as the availability and accessibility of instruments which make thoughts of suicide more realizable is another layer. Drinking alcohol disinhibits sound behavior. In the same way, the availability of pesticides almost always guarantee their use for self-inflicted injuries.

The commercial agricultural landscape carved to produce for the market is indeed a fertile ground for cash and material enrichment, ironically, it is the same landscape where the manifest problem of self-inflicted injury through pesticide ingestion has become prevalent. How the community “make sense” of suicide is revealing of euphemisms which have to be understood in the light where the community themselves do not seem to understand what is happening.

However, this research project may still be limited even as it captured correlates of suicide that include predisposing factors, reinforcing factors and enabling factors as there have been changing dynamics of the community. The qualitative nature of the research as well as certain ethical guidelines that guided the team considering the intrusive character of the project are other factors that limited its scope. Nevertheless, all these provide the material and social context that relate to the pervasiveness of risk factors that have to be considered in understanding and addressing the phenomenon.

RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

“*Pansig’dan*¹: promoting Well being in an Agricultural Community in Northern Luzon”, is an interdisciplinary action research and an extension project that aims to understand the phenomenon of youth suicide through pesticide poisoning in the context of cash crop farming. The end goal is to be able to provide appropriate recommendations to the concerned stakeholders of the affected communities. It is a response to the alarming suicide incidence that started in 2008 until the first quarter of 2009 in the northern vegetable farming towns of Benguet, a province of the Cordillera region, Philippines.

Self-inflicted injuries, to begin with has been a historical and chronic problem in Benguet. Official health data of the province in the early 70s placed suicide as the 10th leading cause of mortality (Benguet Profile, 1970).

The project team was formed by Benguet State University (BSU) through the Institute of Social Research and Development (ISRD) with the Department of Social Sciences and selected faculty members of the College of Teacher Education and ResearchMate Inc., a local non-government organization for information management and promotion. It started as a response to the call of a women’s organization for extension activities in one of the affected communities. A community study was later conceptualized as a result of the active participation of ISRD and BSU’s Gender and Development Program to the Provincial Pesticide Task Force created by the province of Benguet to investigate the alarming deaths reported by affected families and clinics/hospitals catering to these farming communities. The extension site of the project also became the location of the study because of the positive and strong support of the community’s women organization.

The study is composed of four inter-disciplinary fields: anthropology, economics, history and psychology. The extension activities conducted with the community were facilitated by the researchers together with two psychologists and a development communication specialist. The project was implemented in 2009 from June to September and in 2012 from August to September. A memorandum of Agreement between the study site’s municipal government and BSU was signed in August 2009 to give the project team the personality to conduct its activities in the area.

The study is largely qualitative. Except for a semi-structured interview questionnaire used to obtain the suicide profiles and economic data, the team mainly gathered its data through Key Informant Interviews (KII), Focus Group Discussions and informal discussions during community assemblies for the project’s extension activities. The anthropological part of the study did a follow-up on FGD respondents by conducting KIIs. Additional FGDs were likewise facilitated with four groups in the community’s public secondary school.

There was one FGD conducted with students of the secondary school; one FGD with parents and/or relatives of those who committed suicide and one FGD for the elderly. The KIIs were conducted separately with this groups including the community’s local government officials.

Respondents of the study were purposively sampled. The following were the inclusion criteria: resident of the community; a farmer for atleast two years; present in the community at the time of interview; and willing to be interviewed.

¹ In the study site’s native language, *pansigedan* or *pansig’dan* comes from the *Kankana-ey* root word *siged*, which pertains to a “good” condition or the state of being well. *Pansigedan* refers to anything that favors the attainment of that state or condition.

INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS

(Abridged/improved from the editorial policies of the Benguet State University)

1. All manuscripts must be the result of research activities (technical or social) that are relevant to the development thrust of the University and should not have been published elsewhere.
2. Acceptance of manuscript is on the basis of the review and approval by a corps of technical editors and selected referees.
3. Original photos should be submitted in PNG or JPEG format with corresponding captions.
4. The manuscript should not exceed 40 pages, typed double spaced in 12-point Times New Roman on one side of 8 1/2" paper with margins of 3.81 cm on the left and 2.54 cm top, right and bottom and must be submitted in hard and electronic copy via bsupublications@gmail.com using MS Word Program.
5. The manuscript should be organized in the following order: (a) Title; (b) Authors/s; (c) Authors/s position; (d) Abstract; (e) Introduction; (f) Materials and Methods; (g) Results and Discussion; (h) Conclusions and Recommendations; (i) Acknowledgment, optional; and (j) Literature Cited ; and written all centered.
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8. The abstract must be 200 words or less, summarizing the main points of the articles.
9. The introduction should contain scope and statement of the problem, brief survey of previous work and objectives and importance of the study.
10. Citations in the text follows the name and year system, e. g.

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(Adeyemo, 2010), Yeo (2009) or Boquiren (n.d.)

Two Authors:

Pladio and Villasenor (2004), (Pladio and Villasenor, 2004)

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11. Materials and methods should describe very concisely but comprehensively the materials used, techniques, and lay-out of the research.
12. Scientific names and other foreign expressions such as *in situ*, *et al.*, *i.e.*, and other similar expressions are italicized. Technical terms, abbreviations and acronyms must be defined.
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3. Provide quality and client-responsive research and extension services;
4. Strengthen and enhance institutional capability in generating revenue towards self-reliance
5. Develop and strengthen quality management system towards economy; and
6. Strengthen and expand private public partnership.

PURPOSE

- * To provide quality education that will produce globally-competitive graduates;
- * To generate and disseminate appropriate knowledge and technologies that will promote sustainable resource development;
- * To strengthen and enhance institutional capability in generating revenue towards self-reliance;
- * To establish competent and effective services geared towards efficiency and economy; and
- * To develop harmonious and cooperative University Community relationships.



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