

Sacada: A look at the Hacienda System in the Philippines

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In examining the situation of sacadas, the author used the 'empowerment' theory – one's capacity for critical thinking and understanding of structural inequalities. The sacadas have remained marginalized and disempowered over the past years owing to the transitory and migratory nature of their work, their lack of access to social protection, and the socio-economic inequities that pervade in their work environment.

This paper discusses the results of the study done by the author and her team on the situation of sacadas in the Philippines. The study is one of the three major components of the ABK3 Livelihoods, Education, Advocacy and Protection (LEAP) to Reduce Child Labor in Sugarcane Areas. It is carried out by the University of the Philippines Social Action and Research for Development Foundation (UPSARDF) with funding support from the United States Department of Labour and with technical oversight from World Vision Development Foundation in partnership with the following: Child Fund Philippines; Educational Research and Development Assistance Foundation; Community Economic Ventures, Inc.; and Sugar Industry Foundation, Inc.¹

¹ Note however that this paper focuses on the general situation of sacada workers and not on child labor, which topic will be tackled in another research paper.

The paper is divided into the following main parts: a) introduction; b) analytical framework; c) tracing the roots of the hacienda system and the sacadas; d) contemporary setting of the sacadas: the sugar industry; e) the hacienda system: how it works; f) personal, work and living conditions of the sacadas; g) institutional support system; and h) analyses, conclusions and implications.

More specifically, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the personal, work and living conditions of the sacada workers?
2. What forms of support are being made available to the sacada workers?
3. How do the situations of sacada workers contribute to their empowerment or disempowerment?

The data and information integrated in this report were culled from various sources such as: reviews of existing literature and studies on the sacadas; case studies; survey interviews; and key informant interviews. Selection of respondents was purposive given the lack of prior information on the number of sacada workers, their exact locations and their availability for the interviews. A total of 168 individual interviews were conducted in the provinces of Batangas (53), Negros Occidental (52) and Negros Oriental (63).

Analytical Framework

Poverty, which pushes individuals to engage in low-paying and often exploitative work, is both a structural and a relationship issue. The struggle of farm workers in sugar areas is basically an agrarian issue that stems from poverty, exacerbated by its concomitant effects (lack of access to resources, basic services and facilities, etc.). The author used the theory of 'empowerment' as it focuses on internal and external forces that influence the capacities of individuals and groups to bring about changes in their personal and community living conditions.

‘Empowerment’ is essentially defined as one’s ability or control to create and take action to achieve personal and collective aims; and one’s capacity for critical thinking and understanding of structural inequalities towards greater access to resources, influence and power that can yield positive changes within persons and their environment.

For instance, Craig (2002) as cited by Toomey (2009, p. 183) defines empowerment as “the creation of sustainable structures, processes, and mechanism, over which local communities have an increased degree of control, and from which they have a measurable impact on public and social policies affecting these communities.” On the same vein, Hicks (2006, p. 381) as cited by Garlick (2012) posits that empowerment involves the creation and taking of action of people, groups and communities for them to meet their physical, spiritual and psychological needs in order to enhance their well-being and increase their personal and interpersonal power.

From another perspective, empowerment is not viewed as an alternative solution to the redistribution of unequally divided resources but rather as an act of providing the necessary tools to shape the whole person and promote a critical way of thinking and consciousness (Ledwith, 2005). In the context of social work, empowerment includes an intentional process of people taking the initiative and action in gaining power, taking over control in their lives and gaining a greater access to social resources with the aim of achieving personal and collective goals (Radovic, 2008). In the process of empowerment, users are helped to become aware of and critically understand structural inequalities and obstacles, and support them in the development of those skills and actions through which they can more considerably expand their influence and power in society. The final results of empowerment are expected to lead to changes in the approach to social resources and to an increased social power of deprived individuals, groups or communities.

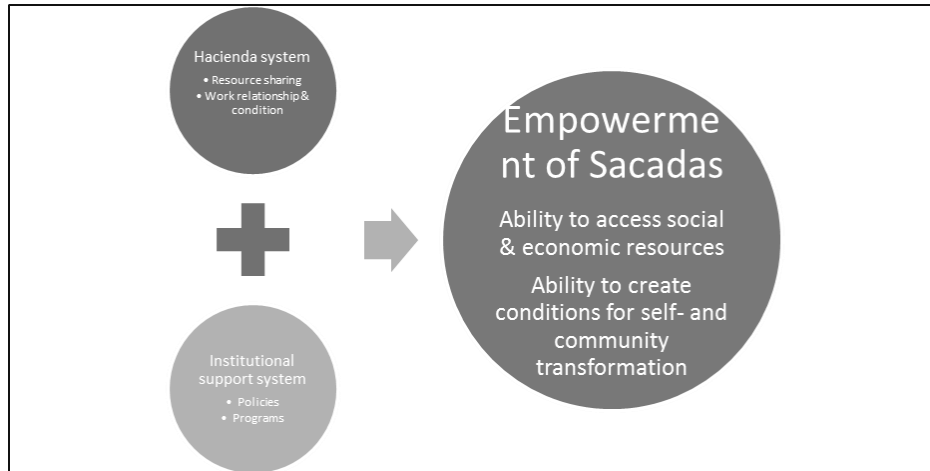


Figure 1: Analytical Framework on the Empowerment of the Sacadas

The preceding figure shows the interplay of factors that can influence the degree of empowerment or disempowerment of the sacadas: a) the hacienda system, and b) the presence or absence of needed institutional support. The hacienda system refers to the sharing of resources and the decision-making process involved in the sharing process. It also includes the relationship between and among the key players within the hacienda-sacada work system, and the work and living conditions of the sacada workers. Institutional support system refers to the enabling environment (policies and programs) that promotes and ensures the safety and welfare of the sacada workers and their families.

‘Empowerment’ is defined in this paper as the ability of the sacadas to access social and economic resources and services, and their capacity to bring about positive and long-lasting changes (transformations) in their lives.

Tracing the Roots of the Hacienda System and the Sacadas

The origin of the *hacienda* system dates back to the colonial past of the Philippines. It was instituted by the Spanish colonialists as an economic and political unit and was entrusted to loyal natives. The *haciendas* served in producing surplus for the consumption of the colonialists and imposing control in the communities. Natives who resisted colonization were displaced and escaped to areas where the colonial government's control was weak. They eventually joined the armed uprisings against the colonizers. They were hunted as "bandits" for resisting the invaders. *Hacienderos* aided the Spanish colonizers in pacifying the native inhabitants. Property rights over the haciendas were protected under the American rule up to the present (Deduro, 2005).

As early as the 1850s, sugar was introduced in the Philippines and became a subsistence crop among early Filipino farmers. The United States, through the Laurel-Langley Agreement, granted the Philippine a high quota for sugar into the US markets. Soon, sugar became a leading export earning crop of the country. One of the effects of the sugar boom in the country was that lands planted with sugar increased tenfold. In Negros, the leading sugar producing province in the Visayas, 70% of its total agricultural lands were turned into sugar lands (PhilDHRRRA, 2009). Vast fertile lands tilled by peasants for centuries were expropriated and converted into sugar lands and other export-producing agricultural estates (Ito & Olea, 2004).

In the 1860s, Negros Occidental was the leading sugar producing province in the Philippines, well on its way to becoming known as the "sugar bowl of the Philippines." The hacienda system that evolved in Negros was built on sharecropping and debt relations. The rich sugar families, all of Spanish roots, created a classic *hacienda* system much like the Latin American model. They took paternalistic care of "their" people pretty much from cradle to grave, serving as godparents, paying their medical bills, and occasionally bailing them out of jail. In return, they demanded and received complete subservience based on sharecropping and the "company store" model (Henderson, 2000).

In the mid-1980s, more than 60% of total production and about 80% of Negros' output came from farms 25 hectares or larger. Countrywide, tenancy arrangements existed for approximately half the sugarcane farms; however, they were generally the smaller ones, averaging 2.5 hectares in size and accounting for only slightly more than 20% of land planted in the crop (The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1991).

Elsewhere, laborers were employed, generally at very low wages. A survey undertaken in 1990 by the governor of Negros Occidental found that only one-third of the island's sugar planters were paying the then-mandated minimum wage of Php72.50 per day. The contrast between the lavish lifestyles of Negros *hacienderos* and the poverty of their workers, particularly migrant laborers known as *sacadas*, epitomized the vast social and economic gulf separating the elite in the Philippines from the great mass of the population (The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1991). The *hacienda* system in Negros has made many peasants more dependent and susceptible to hunger, maltreatment and indebtedness (Billig, 2003, p. 37).

Who are the Sacadas?

Sugar is a labor intensive crop, but labor remained in short supply particularly in Negros up to the 1920s. The need for *sacadas* or seasonal laborers was due to the persistent shortage of labor and the unsuccessful methods employed by *hacienderos* to secure an adequate labor supply at cutting time. These resulted in substantial loss in crop production, which necessitated the hiring of *sacadas* from nearby provinces (mostly from Antique, Panay's poorest province) just for the harvest season (Billig, 2003).

Historically, *sacadas* are the farm workers in the sugar plantations of Negros. They are described as exploited both by the *hacenderos* and the *contratistas*. The latter are labor contractors who earn money by serving as middlemen with the *sacadas* serving as their “merchandise.” They are also called seasonal cane cutters, or seasonal daily wage laborers. They usually receive a wage during the peak labor season from November to April for being temporary workers usually in sugarcane plantations (Corpuz, 1992).

There are two categories of workers in *haciendas* – *sacada* and *dumaan*. *Sacadas* are migrant workers who render work usually during the milling season (October to May) particularly in the cutting and loading of sugarcane. Land preparation, planting and weeding are also done during this time. On the other hand, *dumaan* (or *duma-an*) are permanent farm workers who work in the *haciendas* whole-year round, albeit for two to three days a week only. (Deduro, 2005)

The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) considers both *sacadas* and *dumaans* as seasonal farm workers, or those who are employed on a recurrent, periodic or intermittent basis by an agricultural enterprise or farm, whether as a permanent or non-permanent laborer. Sabangan (2009) reported that 70% to 80% of the workforce in Negros are seasonal farm workers. Most of the regular farm workers in the province are composed of only a few individuals loyal to the landowners, namely the *encargados*, *cabos*, drivers, and watchmen or *ronda*. *Encargador* is a Spanish term for a person who manages the petty cash for *sacada* work operations. *Cabo* is a term used to refer to the right-hand person of the contractor who is entrusted to supervise the work of the *sacadas* and to ensure that their basic needs (food, shelter) are provided.

The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law

The *hacienda* system can also be called a *haciendero-sacada* system, which is a system of agrarian relations (Corpuz, 1992, p. 145). Ownership of land began to concentrate in the hands of a few but rich families. They emerged as the dominant political and social forces in the Philippine society wresting control over key economic institutions, occupying or influencing key government offices and dominating political institutions in the country. On the other hand, the small farmers became landless – merely working as tenants and farm workers, which resulted in extreme poverty of the rural areas where they were found (PhilDHRRA, 2009).

On 10 June 1988, the Philippine Government enacted Republic Act No. 657 otherwise known as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law, which provides for the acquisition and distribution of all agricultural lands within a period of ten years. Through the government's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), all lands exceeding seven hectares were bought by the government and sold to the landless farmers who pay for it in installments over 15 years (Velasco, 2014). Under CARP, large land-holdings are broken up and distributed to farmers and workers in particular *haciendas*. Each farmer is given a Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA) for their new property. Under the law, a landowner can only retain five hectares, regardless of the size of the *hacienda* (DAR, n.d.). On 7 August 2009, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER) was signed into law, extending the deadline of distributing agricultural lands to farmers for five years (DAR, n.d.).

The implementation of CARP is not without problems for the sugar workers. Studies have shown that since sugarcane is harvested only once a year, a sugar planter may need at the very least ten hectares to be able to support his family's needs. It is another story for peasants and sugar workers who won one to 1.5 hectares through land reform. They would need more than the land they own to survive

(Velasco, 2014). Furthermore, many of the land-owning elite refused to give up their property and in their resistance to comply, employed violent tactics against workers' groups. This included using goons to intimidate or trick workers to lease back their land to the landlords in return for lower prices (Velasco, 2014).

The *hacenderos* are not only the economic elite, they are also the "king makers" in politics. Most of the Philippine political elite came from sugar baron families. They are a big power bloc in national politics (Deduro, 2005). The powerful sugar elites continue to enjoy strong influence in government. Agricultural lands owned by the sugar political elites continue to circumvent the implementation of agrarian reform (PhilDHRRA, 2009).

Under the Philippine land reform program, transfer of control and ownership of agricultural land to the actual tillers should have been implemented. However, it has not been the case for sugarcane plantations because many planters have been exempted. Others believed that the fragmentation of lands into small farms resulted in negative impact on productivity because small farmers began employing family members including children in the farm to recoup earnings (UPSARDF, 2013).

Although not directly referring to the land reform situation in the sugar industry, nonetheless the following situations resulting in long delays could apply. DAR reported that in some cases, technical descriptions in the land titles (which determine the boundaries of the land) were found to be erroneous and had to be corrected. Some titles were destroyed, and therefore, had to be reissued by undergoing a court process, similar to filing a case. Potential beneficiaries argued among themselves on who should or should not be qualified as beneficiaries; these disputes had to be mediated or resolved by the government. In other cases, landowners petitioned that their lands be exempted or excluded from CARP coverage, and some of these petitions went all the way up to the Supreme Court.

In addition, smaller parcels of land (five to ten hectares) were only processed in the last year of implementation of CARPER (July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014). Past efforts focused on bigger parcels of land, which involved more paperwork to process. Now that efforts are focused on smaller but more numerous cuts of land, there are more claim folders to process and distribute (DAR, n.d.).

Contemporary Setting for the Sacadas: the Sugar Industry

There are at least 19 provinces and 11 regions that produce sugarcane in the Philippines. A range from 360,000 to 390,000 hectares is devoted to sugarcane production. It is estimated that as of 2012, the industry provided direct employment to 700,000 sugarcane workers spread across 19 sugar producing provinces (Sugar Master Plan Foundation, Inc. 2010, p. 7). On average, a sugarcane worker earns a little over USD3 a day, less than half of the government mandated minimum wage. A seasonal worker earns roughly USD2 (Velasco, 2014).

As of 2012, the island of Negros still continued to account for a large portion (57%) of total domestic sugar production. Luzon produced 14%; Mindanao, 19%; Panay, 6%; and Eastern Visayas, 4%. Total domestic sugar production comes primarily from four major planter federations and three major miller associations. Producers who belong to these organized federations account for 90% of the total domestic sugar production (Global Agriculture Information Network, 2012).

As of Crop Year 2012-2013, 29 mills were operational in Luzon (6), Negros (13) Panay (3), Eastern Visayas (4), and Mindanao (3). Victorias Milling Corporation (VMC) is known as the biggest refinery in the country and in Asia and the third largest in the world (Sugar Regulatory Administration, 2014).

Structures were established over the years to oversee the sugar industry and address the exponential increase in world price as well as the precipitous dip in local prices of sugar: the Philippine Sugar Administration (PSA) in 1937; the Philippine Sugar Institute (PHILSUGIN) in 1951; the Philippine Sugar Commission (PHILSUCOM) in 1976; and the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) in 1986. All these structures performed regulatory functions, including ensuring sugar price stability, economic viability, and continued research and technological development.

The SRA is a member of the District Tripartite Council (DTC) that monitors the sugar industry operations. It is purely government-funded, with all its projects delegated to the Mill District Development Foundation, Inc. (MDDFI). The SRA provides technical assistance to sugarcane planters, in the form of demonstration farms, eco-tests, and testing of new technical varieties. SRA membership is based on production volume; small planters do not qualify.

MDDFI was formerly known as Mill District Development Councils (MDDC), registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) on 8 November 2000. As a government partner and a conduit for funds, MDDFI joins the monthly tripartite meetings chaired by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and receives money for project implementation. It also develops and submits project proposals to the Sugar Regulatory Administration. MDDFI has a direct relationship with cooperatives and gives training (upon request by cooperatives) to sacadas on the proper cutting of sugarcanes. However, it deals mainly with local farmers and is composed of planters' organizations; thus, it is not directly involved with sacadas.

The federations of sugarcane planters associations are designated to monitor milling operations in their areas of operation. They serve as “guardians”, watching the relationship between planters and the sugar central (milling company). In Batangas, the Federation was heavily involved in the setting of cutters’ minimum wage, time and motion study of migrant workers, specifically the hours needed to cut sugarcane, and the establishment of a code of conduct for children below 18 years old. Its primary task is the exercise of significant control points, from arrival of trucks in yards to sugar production. It is concerned with the wages and welfare of the maggapak (cutters) and matters related to sugar planters.

An organization of sugar producers, the Philippine Sugar Millers Association (PSMA) was organized in 1922 as the Philippine Sugar Association (PSA). A non-stock, non-profit organization, PSMA was initially involved in research and development, and later earned credit for having substantially helped in increasing sugar yield in the country and improving milling efficiency. It also concerned itself with the protection of the interests of the sugar industry in working for favorable legislation both in the Philippines and in the United States, which was the country's principal export market. This activity was of utmost importance as the survival of the sugar industry depended, to a large extent, on the entry of Philippine sugar in the US market (PSMA, n.d.).

Among the major challenges faced by the sugar industry is the impending enforcement of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 2015 whereby tariffs will be reduced to only five percent. The influx of imported sugar products in the local markets will lower the demand for locally produced sugar thus could “imperil the livelihood of about 62,000 farmers and 600,000 workers in the country’s sugar industry” (Medenilla, 2014). To hurdle the effects of AFTA, the House of Representatives approved on third and final reading House Bill No. 52 or the Sugarcane Industry Development Act of 2014, which contains measures including government assistance to the sugar industry such as the setting up of the sugar industry fund. If passed, the bill is envisioned to help the sugar industry become competitive (*House Approves Sugarcane Bill*, 2014).

How are the sugar industry players preparing themselves for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Free Trade Agreement (AFTA)? The deputy administrator of the Philippines' SRA noted that some mills and refiners may consider consolidation because they can't afford the investments to modernize. Upgrades will bring down production costs and increase the recovery rate of sugar, which is lower than in other countries. Pressure for sugar companies to become more competitive -- and consolidate -- is growing ahead of a reduction in regional sugar tariffs in 2015. The margins of Philippine sugar refiners are being squeezed because of their production costs, creating opportunities for companies that can bring greater efficiency (Sayson & Yap, 2014).

The foregoing scenario is favorable for those who have huge capital to buy small sugar companies or acquire mills and refineries. In the Philippines, prominent Chinese business tycoons have invested in large corporations, including ownership of sugar milling companies and sugar trading. For instance, billionaire Lucio Tan has increased his stake in VMC with the acquisition of shares and has been beefing up his interest in it in a move seen to foil efforts of other entities interested to invest in the sugar mill (Montealegre, 2014).

The Hacienda System: How it Works

In order to understand the system of operation within a *hacienda*, interviews were conducted with sugarcane plantation owners, contractors, and known cooperatives of sugarcane plantation owners. There is no organization set up solely for the sacadas. Although they operate in groups (usually a group is composed of relatives and neighbors), they are for the most part working more as individuals.

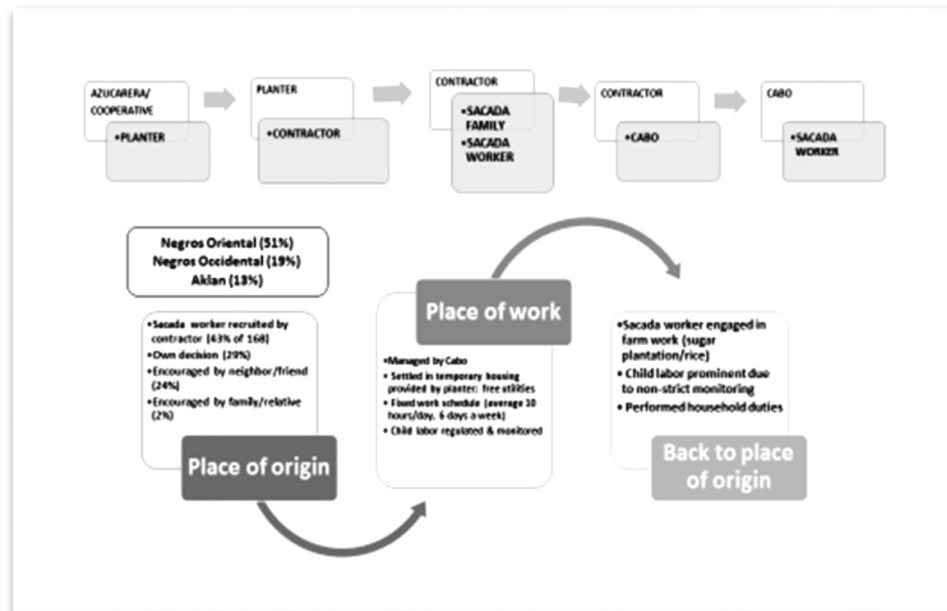


Figure 2: Sacada work process

A key informant from one of two big sugar milling corporations in Negros Oriental revealed that there are more than 4,000 sugar planters in the whole province. A Chinese businessman, John Gokongwei, had purchased the corporation from a group of sugar planters in 1988.

The average sugar cane production in lowland areas before was 90-100 tons per hectare; at the time of interview (May 2014), it was 120 tons per hectare. The corporation does *pesada* or the actual cane weighing and juice analysis before issuing payment to planters.

Payment of milled sugar is done by bidding although the corporation itself can also buy sugar. There is a standardized price set but it can go higher depending on bidding result. The corporation pays the planters after the bidding. Cash advances made by planters are deducted from the total payment. The milling rate is 330 tons/hour but the corporation can only process an average of 300 tons/hour or a total of 2,400 tons of cane per day (short of the targeted 8,000 tons/day). One ton of cane is equivalent to 50 kilos or one bag of sugar. The price per bag ranged from Php1,400 to Php1,690, depending on sugar quality. The plantation owner's share is 67% of the total price of milled sugar.

Sugarcane plantation owners deal either directly with a sugar mill company (*azucarera*) or indirectly through a planters' cooperative. They hardly interact directly with the sacada workers. They hire a contractor who in turn hires sacadas from other places, mostly coming from Negros and Aklan. A big-time contractor may subcontract the hiring of workers to a barangay official. The contractor or sub-contractor hires sacada workers from poor and far-flung communities.

A sacada is normally given a cash advance equivalent to Php5,000 but the amount can go as high as Php15,000 depending on his years of experience, strength and previous work performance. The cash advance is usually given to the spouse of the sacada at the shipping terminal/port before he departs to his place of work. The amount is deducted later on from his wages.

At place of work, the contractor appoints a *cabo* or foreman who manages the day-to-day affairs of the sacadas, including providing them with cash advances for their daily needs. The sacadas purchase grocery items from the *cabo*, usually consisting of rice, noodles, sardines, soap, and other basic necessities. Sacadas have very limited decision-making power as they do not have full control of their resources, time and activities. Even their interactions with people in the community are restricted by the *cabo* for fear that they might encounter troubles or might abscond while searching for another job.

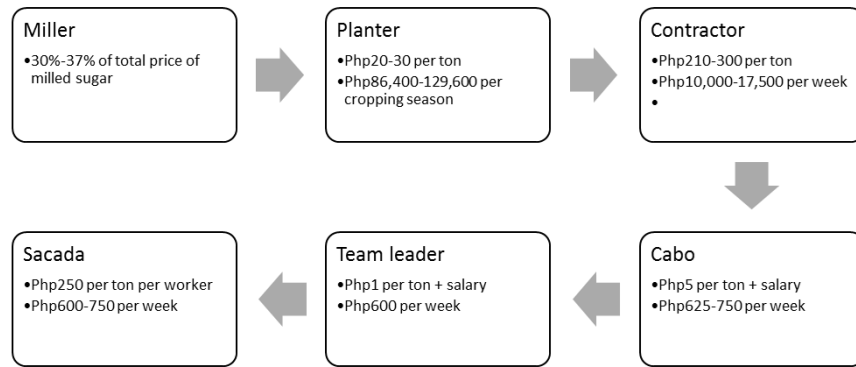


Figure 3: Distribution of income from sugarcane proceeds

The above flowchart shows the distribution of income from the sugar mill corporation down to the sacada worker. Note that it was difficult to get the exact income figure from the planters interviewed as they were hesitant to divulge this information, except for one who mentioned that he was able to gain a net profit of Php20-30 per ton. Estimating the total number of tons of sugarcane produced at 4,320 per cropping/harvesting season (based on 180 tons per week or 720 tons per month multiplied by six months), a plantation owner can generate Php86,400 to Php129,600 as net profit from the sugar plantation business.

Based on a key informant interview, a contractor gets paid on the average Php300 per ton. A group (composed of 10-12 workers) can harvest and haul an average of 20 tons per truck. Of this amount, the contractor pays a group of sacada workers Php125 per ton or Php2,500 for 20 tons, which is equally divided among the members (Php208 to Php250 per member). The frequency of truck loading ranges from three to five times per week. Thus, each group of workers can receive Php7,500 to Pp12,500 per week, or Php600 to Php750 per individual worker each week. The contractor gets Php10,000 to Php17,500 per week.

The average daily wages of sacadas (Php208 to Php250) fall slightly below the minimum daily wage mandated by the Philippine government for agricultural (plantation) workers - Php255 for Region 6 and Php261 to Php337.50 for Region 4-A (DOLE, 2014).

After six months of harvesting work, sacada workers return home to their province and look for other means of livelihood. Thus begins ‘tiempo muerto’ or ‘dead season’, the time between planting and harvesting (usually between April and September) when there is no work in the cane fields (Velasco, 2014). However, the current study found that some sacadas are either hired to work in a rice farm or in another sugarcane plantation in the same or neighboring community. Since they then become permanent residents in their community, their status shifts from *sacada* (seasonal farm workers) to *dumaan* (resident farm workers). A few others are engaged in backyard gardening or tending a small variety store. This shows the very limited livelihood options for the sacada workers.

The resident farm workers live on cash advances deducted from their wages when work resumes, but those who are not regularly employed by their *hacienderos* either make their way to the coast or cities to try and get temporary work, or get employed in their landlords’ houses as domestic help. Others turn to loan sharks (Velasco, 2014).

Personal, Work and Living Conditions of the Sacadas

Characteristics of Sacada Workers

Of the 168 sacada workers interviewed, slightly more than half (54%) were able to reach but not graduate from elementary school. About the same number (51%) came from Negros Oriental. They have worked as sacada for an average of 11 years (ranging from less than one month to 53 years). Their nature of work was

mainly harvesting (53%), followed by hauling (28%). A few others did weeding and sugarcane peeling. Sacadas worked for an average of 10 hours a day and six days per week.

Four out of ten (43%) respondents were hired by a contractor while the others decided to work as sacada on their own (29%) or with the prodding of a friend or neighbor (24%). A big majority (83%) said that they did not pay anything to the contractor. This could indicate their lack of knowledge about the income distribution arrangement that is taking place in the sacada contracting business.

Table 1. Sacada Workers' Perception of Family's Living Condition

Perceptions	Batangas	Negros Oriental	Negros Occidental	Total
	N = 53	N = 63	N = 52	N = 168
Able to sufficiently provide for all its needs.	43%	19%	10%	24%
Sometimes fails to provide all for its needs.	32%	48%	40%	40%
Oftentimes unable to provide for its needs.	6%	24%	25%	18%
Finds it really difficult to provide for its needs.	15%	10%	23%	15%

The above table shows that the sacadas' families were generally able to provide for their needs but not all the time. They reasoned out that it was because their income was very insufficient given their numerous expenses (mainly on food).

Respondents were asked to compare the living condition in their place of work to that of their own community. Many (45% of 168) said that their place of work is much better than their place of residence while slightly more than one-fourth (27%) considered the conditions in both locations as just the same. The next table shows the descriptions given by respondents of their own community.

Table 2. Survey Respondents' Description of their Place of Origin

Living condition in place of origin	Batangas	Negros Oriental	Negros Occidental	Total
	(N=53)	(N= 63)	(N= 52)	(N= 168)
Own community far from the city; difficult to reach	55%	54%	63%	57%
Many unemployed people.	62%	41%	38%	47%
Many people not having anything to eat due to poverty.	68%	29%	44%	47%
Many children unable to go to school.	74%	37%	48%	53%
Own community lacks basic facilities (school, health center, etc.)	28%	32%	48%	36%
Own community lacks basic services (education, health, etc.)	47%	27%	60%	45%
Poor road condition	55%	46%	69%	57%
Often flooded	64%	27%	58%	50%
Own community has peace and order problem.	38%	22%	27%	29%

Problems with distance, road condition, and education were most commonly cited by the sacada respondents. However, while they view their place of work as much better than their own community, sacada respondents usually experienced body pains, lack of sleep, and homesickness; these are aggravated by insufficient food, absence of health services, and sometimes relationship issues with their fellow sacada worker.

The following case illustrates the typical work and living conditions of sacada workers.

Case of Tito

Tito, 21 years old, is from Mabinay, Negros Oriental. His live-in partner of five years, Jessa, is 19 years old. The couple is blessed with a one year old baby girl. They all lived with 40 other migrant workers in a big concrete living quarter by the main road along Cadiz Crossing, Daga, Cadiz City.

Tito was one of the 40 “tabaseros” or sugar cane cutters brought to Hacienda Bayabas, Cadiz- Agro by a contractor from Antique. The group arrived on May 1 and their contract ended in June of the same year (2014) when the central mill closed. “Tabaseros” who brought their families normally lived in separate tents or quarters, according to the foreman. However, since the contractor was in a rush to get the 40 “emergency workers” settled, Tito’s family had to stay in the same quarter as the others.

The living quarter is a big but messy, cluttered, dimly lit quarter made of concrete walls (10x20 meters) and tin roof. Each worker has a cubicle or sleeping area (3 x 3 meters), and a double decked bed made of Gmelina wood. The young couple had to hang a blanket and used plastic rice bag to serve as a wall for their own cubicle. There are only two big windows on one side of the quarter, and ventilation

comes through small (4 x 12 inches) openings on the other end by the ceiling. There is a cooking area inside the quarter which is good for six people cooking at a time, using charcoal. The rest do their cooking outside using three stones to support the cooking pots. There is water from an artesian well manually pumped near the quarter for all purposes: cooking, drinking, washing, and bathing. A small sari-sari store owned by the contractor is attached to the entrance of the quarter. And there are also toilets inside the quarter.

Before coming to Negros Occidental, Tito's family lived with his parents. Tito is third among nine children. Their house is made of bamboo and nipa shingles. Their place is mountainous, remote and they had to walk three hours to reach the main road. The family plant corn, bananas, sweet potatoes in a three hectare "kaingin," or slash and burn agriculture area, which they claim "they own." They also engage in charcoal making. There were no livelihood opportunities so Tito and his four older siblings had to find work elsewhere. In recent years, five of them worked as "tabaseros" in Negros Occidental.

Tito worked for six days a week. Sunday is a free day. He received Php130 per ton per day, with his group's performance of 13 tons (output of 10 workers). According to the "cabo" or foreman, Tito is a good worker and he stayed with his original team. In each team, the workers would appoint from among themselves their leader. The team would strategize how to fast track their daily work. Their daily routine consisted of the following: wake up at 5 a.m., take breakfast, take a bath; go to the sugar cane fields at 6 a.m.; work until 9 a.m., go back to the quarter, take lunch; work in the field from 1-5 p.m.; and have dinner at 6-7 p.m. Their only social activity was their team meeting at 9 p.m., during which they discussed their work and strategy for the following day.

Tito considered his “tabasero” or cut and load work as both light and hard work. The lighter part was the cutting of canes which was done through longer hours. The harder part was the loading of heavy canes through shorter hours. Many times Tito would complain to Jessa of body pain, exhaustion, and sleepless nights due to aching muscles. What he liked best was the fact that they were assured of three meals a day and he got paid regularly.

Institutional Support System

As the government’s direct response to the plight of sacadas, the DOLE issued Department Order No. 08-10, Series of 2010 (Guideline on the Implementation of the Integrated Services for Migratory Sugar Workers (I-SERVE) Project in November 2010. The guideline is pursuant to paragraphs 1 and 3 of Section 9 of Republic Act No. 6982 (Sugar Amelioration Act of 1991) and paragraph 2 of Section of Rule VIII of the Amended Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) and the Department Order No. 35-02, Series of 2002, and upon the recommendation of the Sugar Tripartite Council as embodied in its Resolution No. 9, Series of 2010.

I-SERVE SACADAS Project is an integrated approach geared towards changing the socio-economic condition of the migratory sugar workers (MSWs) by augmenting their income, ensuring compliance of employers / contractors to protective and welfare policies, and providing the workers the opportunity to participate in policy making processes so that their problems and concerns may be addressed appropriately. This is supposed to be accomplished through capacity building interventions, strengthening enforcement of existing policies on their protection and welfare, facilitating access to social protection, and providing opportunities to workers to participate in decision making processes. These include all migratory sugar workers (MSW) and their families who are interested to benefit from employment and income generating projects, and other support services.

Initially, the project was to be implemented in Regions V, VI and VII. Replication in other areas with high concentration of MSW shall be subject to availability of funds.

In a report, Labor and Employment Secretary Rosalinda Dimapilis-Baldoz said that a Php10.7 million fund had been allotted for the project that would provide for social protection and welfare for sacadas, and strengthen the enforcement of existing policies under RA 6982, or the Sugar Amelioration Act, and the DOLE Department Order 18-02 on migratory sugar workers. The project also intended to strengthen Sagip Batang Manggagawa Program for child laborers in sugar plantations and advocacies aimed at eliminating the worst forms of child labor under RA 9231. She further said that there were initially about 2,000 families or 30,000 sacadas in selected communities in the pilot provinces of Aklan, Negros Occidental, Negros Oriental, Antique and Camarines Sur who would benefit from the I-SERVE package of services (DOLE, 2010).

However, the communities and local government units visited by the team hardly knew about the DOLE's I-SERVE SACADAS, perhaps since it was only promulgated in 2010. They have not submitted any proposal for funding by the latter. An interview with the DOLE's I-SERVE SACADAS project focal point revealed that it already supported some projects in its covered regions; unfortunately, not in the areas that were sampled for the study.

A series of Presidential Decrees was issued in 1970-71 for amendments to the domestic sugar amelioration fund. The President directed the Sugar Quota Board to issue an order for the collection of a "Stabilization Fee of P1.00 per picul on all sugar produced, 90 % of which would be distributed to the sugar workers and/or disposed of according to any agreement between the employer and the labor union of his employees, and the balance of 10% would form the working fund of the Sugar

Industry Foundation.” This was further amended on 21 December 1974 through Presidential Decree No. 388, which ordered the Secretary of Labor to issue the necessary rules and regulations on the proper and equitable implementation of the social amelioration program of the sugar industry ("Presidential Decree No. 621," 1974).

The Sugar industry has a social component, benefiting sugarcane workers. Through the Social Amelioration Fund (SAF), a lien is imposed on the volume of sugar produced. This fund is shouldered by sugar planters and millers and collected by the Bureau of Rural Workers. The benefits for the sugarcane workers under the lien include cash bonus, death benefit, maternity benefit, educational grant and livelihood projects (Sugar Master Plan Foundation, Inc., 2010).

A DOLE representative who handles the social amelioration program of the sugar industry in Batangas province shared that the government and the milling districts agreed to give cash bonus for small sugar plantation workers. Each would receive Php20-30 as accumulated fund, which DOLE deposits in a bank. According to him, funds had not been distributed because workers already left. Also, the amount was very small and for workers to go to the DOLE office to receive it would not be cost-efficient as they would have to shoulder the transportation cost. Funds forfeited are brought to the Treasury.

Although discussions regarding social amelioration programs for the sacadas took place among sugarcane planters associations and cooperatives, some key informants said that it would be difficult to comply with the government's social amelioration requirements owing to the sacadas' temporary period of stay in the communities and the seasonal nature of their work. Moreover, some sacadas themselves are not interested in receiving benefits because they believe that these will be deducted from their already insufficient wages.

Survey respondents were asked whether they had received any form of support from any agency or organization to help them with their basic needs. Majority of the respondents from Batangas (70%), Negros Oriental (54%) and Negros Occidental (62%) answered in the negative. For the few who did, they named the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) through its 4Ps and the DOLE as service providers.

Analyses, Conclusions and Implications

The findings reveal that the relationship patterns between the *hacenderos* and the sugar plantation workers/sacadas have not changed much over the years. As reported in 1990:

There was no equal distribution of benefits. Sugar has brought a lot of fortune and has enriched the sugar barons and foreign transnational corporations, and added to the government coffers as well but the sugar workers have not benefited from it. The life of the sugar workers has not been uplifted, and yet, they are the ones who labored hard for it. They toiled in the fields from dawn to dusk, enduring the heat of the sun and the coldness of the rain, suffering all the bitterness of hard work. But never have they tasted the sweetness of their produce. (Asia Watch Report, 1990, p. 89)

The sacadas have remained poor and low- paid, forced to bear the scorching heat of the sun and the back-breaking nature of their work. Despite these, the percentage shares of the income of both owner and contractor are much higher compared to that of the sacadas. This reflects the unequal distribution of power and resources as the sacadas have almost no option to negotiate and decide on what would be a 'fair' and 'just' share amidst their hard work and sacrifices.

Further, sacada workers receive no forms of social protection beyond their wages. Although cognizant of their plight, they suffer in silence. Without a collective voice (no organization to back them up), they simply accept that because of their low education and the absence of livelihood options in their own community, they could not rise above their impoverished condition. In short, they have been disempowered by the virtual absence of opportunities for an alternative way of living, stemming from both personal limitations and unfavorable community environment coupled with the lack of institutional support from the barangay and higher governmental structures.

The sugar mill industry admittedly has not been supportive of the plight of sacadas. They have no programs or services that directly cater to them because they only concentrate on the best interest of the industry itself, and that of the sugarcane plantation owners. The transitory nature of sacada work has become an excuse for the milling companies to not provide the benefits that normally accrue to ordinary workers. But as they say, “if there is a will, there is a way”. The bottom-line is, sacadas have not been a priority (even by the local government units) because they come in and go from their place of work. They do not have a voice because they are transients and ‘strangers’ in their workplace, and are overly dependent on their *cabo* or team leader who exercises much control over their daily routines and resources.

The sacadas describe their own communities less favorably than their place of work. The conditions in their own communities have pushed them to seek employment opportunities elsewhere. They consider sacada work as better than the one they had at home. At least, they get to eat three meals a day and have regular earnings during their six months at work. They view ‘exploitation’ in a different light, that is, as a ‘necessary’ means to survive. Thus, their personal, work and overall living conditions in their home province and in their place of work have not created opportunities for their self-empowerment and transformation.

Ledwith's proposition that empowerment is not an alternative solution to the redistribution of unequally divided resources but rather the act of providing the necessary tools to shape the whole person and promote a critical way of thinking and consciousness may apply in this particular case. Sacadas may need to develop critical thinking about their situation before they can seek changes in their work relations and conditions. But the political and economic environment will need to be adjusted to facilitate the change process.

The communities of sacadas lacked control to create sustainable structures, processes and mechanisms. Being among the least developed communities, they do not have adequate capacities and resources to enable their constituents to resort to alternative means of living. Further, the sacadas have not been helped to "take action to enhance their well-being" as posited by Garlick (2012). Within poor communities, meeting the requisites for economic and social transformations remains a strong challenge.

Institutional support for the sacadas has been wanting. Thus far, many of the sacadas interviewed have not been assisted by any government agency or by any non-government organization, except for issues concerning child labor in sugarcane plantations. Although the development of the I-SERVE SACADAS project is a laudable move by the government (in terms of policy and program support), its actual contributions in addressing the plight of the sacadas have yet to be established.

To recapitulate, there is absence of the elements of 'empowerment' among the sacadas. The study thus affirms the framework of analysis.

To empower the sacadas, concerned individuals or organizations can help them develop a critical mindset about their situation – what can be done, what they can do, and what they will do. The *strengths perspective* in social work does not deny that a problem exists but rather recognizes that people have the innate capacity to address it. Empowerment involves enabling the sacadas to access opportunities for economic self-sufficiency through livelihood skills building, and building their knowledge, social awareness and self-confidence. At the same time, there is a need to pursue active advocacy and mobilization to confront the social and economic inequities that pervade their work environment.

More specifically, the author suggests the following courses of action:

- Facilitate their access to alternative livelihood opportunities coupled with raising their level of self-confidence to address the specific issues that confront them and their families.
- Conduct massive information and education campaigns about the situation and needs of the sacadas and their families to garner support for their cause and ensure respect for their human rights.
- Vigorously advocate for the passage of law that will provide social protection to the sacadas – ensuring their entitlements to social security, health and similar benefits.
- Form an association of sacadas in every community where they are located to facilitate critical awareness-raising, capacity building and social mobilization.
- Integrate a session on the plight of sacada workers in discussions of development issues.
- Develop a course module on organizing and working with the sacadas, including building partnerships with organizations that deal with their issues.

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