Episode 8: Climate Resilience and Women's Empowerment in the Philippines with Raymond Serios and Syrel Aplaon

Philippe Guichandut: Hello, I'm Philippe Guichandut, I'm the General Secretary at the Grameen Crédit Agricole Foundation, and I'm so happy to welcome you. You're coming from far away, you're coming from the Philippines. And Raymond and Syrel, you're working for the Negros Women for Tomorrow Foundation. So, could you just let me know, I mean, what is your position there and how you joined the Foundation?

Syrel Z. Aplaon: Okay. Hello everyone. I'm Syrel. I'm from Negros Women for Tomorrow Foundation, and I'm currently handling the departments of accounting and finance.

Philippe Guichandut: Okay. And you, Raymond?

Raymond Patrick Serios: Yeah, I'm Raymond Serios. I handle administration and strategic projects, primarily IT and HR, together with other projects outside of the microfinance that we do.

Philippe Guichandut: Okay. So, the foundation is a pretty old one, was set up in 1989, if I'm not wrong. And so, looking back all these decades, I mean, what has been for you the most significant milestone that has made your organization grow that well? And we're going to talk about the figures later.

Raymond Patrick Serios: Thanks for that question, Philippe. I think for us, it's a couple of things, but I mean, it's a lot of things, but really three things stand out in particular. First, is being able to replicate Grameen, particularly being able to target the poorest clients and women at that. Women are very important for Negros Women in particular, because the reason we started Negros Women was because there was widespread poverty in our province. And the founders thought that what better way to do it than have the mother in the family find another source of income. So that's the first. I guess the second point there is making sure that we're able to professionalize the way we do things from governance, all the way to our policies and processes in the organization. That way we ready ourselves to be able to maximize the impact and really, or really multiply the impact across the communities where we are in. And then thirdly, now is really, other than professionalize, is really institutionalized there. The way we look at it is how do we make sure that NWTF and its impact actually stays there for another 100 years beyond our lifetime.

Philippe Guichandut: Okay. And in terms of impact, I think that the figures are quite impressive. You have reached more than 600,000 clients for a hundred and more million dollars. So according to you, what have been the most effective strategy to reach this level of outreach, but this level also in terms of quality with a strong focus on women, to make this come at scale and still keep to your mission, original mission, to serve women and especially women empowerment?

Syrel Z. Aplaon: Yeah. I think Raymond initially mentioned that it should be targeting the poorest of the poor, especially women. And as you've said, what really matters for NWTF that we've been in existence for almost 40 years now is having that heart for the poor and not veering away from the mission. So, it's quite a challenge, but with every challenge that we face, we do not shy away whether it's political, social, or even AI for that matter, because we know where we're going. We're very clear on that. And that is helping the poorest women elevate their status of life and their quality of living and building sustainable communities. So, I think the focus on the mission, and we know the strategies on how to do it by following the Grameen methodology has been the forefront and the force that brought us to where we are right now.

Philippe Guichandut: Okay. So, I want us to focus a little bit more on one specific aspect because you do a lot of things. So, we could talk hours about it, but I mean, you are living in a country, the Philippines, where I mean, you have been confronted to a lot of climate shocks, changes and so on. So, could you let us know a little bit more about how your clients are concretely affected? And what have been the responses for you in terms of helping people to face this reality?

Raymond Patrick Serios: Yeah. Well, climate shock or climate change has really affected almost all of our clients. From a personal perspective, they lose their house, their problems in where they live and how they live. And at the same time, they also lose their livelihoods, the crops that they have, or even just working in whatever industry or whatever business activity they have. And that is very, that is very sad. We've been faced with one typhoon after another for the last so many years. I think the last 15 years have been really hard for us, particularly the last five since the pandemic. But then, you know, Filipinos innately have resilience, are very resilient people. You even see in the news that they're still smiling despite all this. But that's not enough. That's not enough. Being resilient is not enough. Being resilient may be nice initially but making sure that these clients are actually educated. It's like how you approach any risk for that matter. Making sure that you have the preventive measures, so educating them on this risk, not only from a personal perspective, but also from their business perspective and making sure that their business is strong enough to handle such problems or such issues when climate change and its effects come. That's one. And then secondly, we come up with products and services, of course, from credit to savings and insurance to make sure that, you know, they're ready. Because we know it's a matter of time when those are going to come. And then thirdly, I think being able to, being ready. We're trying to get the clients ready to also help their neighbors, their next-door neighbor, basically their community. Because at the end of the day, unlike other things, climate change affects the whole community. It doesn't just affect one family or one individual.

Philippe Guichandut: How do you help them to help their community, their neighbors and so on? I mean, to move that way.

Syrel Z. Aplaon: Yeah, for our, I think, in addition to Raymond's long-term plan for end of life and strategies, one of the basic things that we have already instituted whenever there's crisis and calamity is an immediate response to the clients where we look into what are the things that they would need the most, that they can feel that we are there for them and that we are present. So, we've done relief goods immediately if there are typhoons or floods. And at the same time, we have developed flexibility in our collection methodology. Like, for example, for the next one or two months while they're rebuilding their houses and starting up their businesses again, there's no collection. So, we've managed to do some things like that so that they get to, you know, recover faster. And then together with education and training, we're starting to let them see that if they're prepared and if they know what's going to happen in the next time or even providing services or providing loads that would strengthen their houses so that when the next typhoon comes, it's more stronger. And then we continue doing that. Basically, strengthen immediate coping mechanisms and make sure they're flexible in the long term.

Philippe Guichandut: And you are not scared of that, I mean, if it's too flexible in the end, they will not pay you back. And you don't see that? Or is it a way of trust? I mean, someone, they trust in you, in your capacity to be with them in the long-term facing the crisis.

Syrel Z. Aplaon: I think we've, Yolanda, the first Haiyan typhoon, we've experienced that. We've actually managed to put in relief services, do flexible terms, even in insurance. We've learned that when clients understand and see you, that they can get support and immediately from NWTF and that you don't, you know, don't leave them behind. Repayment actually comes back immediately. And they see that we have the heart for them. So, they give back also. So, it's easier for them to recover. And then they pay back. The discipline is there. And we've seen that every time there's calamity, of course, we get to, you know, freeze and income for the institution for some time gets down, but it actually recovers faster.

Raymond Patrick Serios: It would be crazy for any manager, for that matter, to say that we are very risk adverse. We were not nervous as to the results. Of course we were. That particular typhoon that Cyril was telling you about, it affected, I remember, around 55, 60% of our portfolio. And we were thinking this would take at least three to five years to recover. But in less than eight months, I think six, seven months, we were able to recover. And clients, microfinance clients, regardless of if you're in the Philippines or in South America or perhaps even here in Europe or in the first world, they know, they can sense genuineness. I think when you are genuine in the care, with the attention that you give them, they give it back one way or the other.

Philippe Guichandut: A last question. I mean, we could talk about it for a very long time, I guess. But you know, the Grameen Crédit Agricole Foundation, we are an investor and one part of a new strategy LIFT 2028 is really to support our partners to adapt to climate change and to do more and help clients, of course, to be more resilient. So, what type of message would you have to us or to global investors about financing resilience? Because we could be a bit scared, I mean, to say, okay, I mean, come on. I mean, you say 50% of your clients will be affected. Oh my God, we will not give you any support or whatever. So, what is the advice you would tell to us, I mean, investors?

Raymond Patrick Serios: I think from our end, it's very important for investors and partners like us, the microfinance players or the financing partners to understand that the microfinance model is not charity. So even when climate risk comes in, even when disasters come in, the solution still cannot be charity. I have to admit, we don't have the complete solution until today. This is 2026. There's so much AI, there's so much technology, but we still don't have the complete set of solutions. Yes, there are things, there are innovations that are coming up, parametric insurance technology to be able to predict these things and their effects, but they're not enough yet. What we need to do when faced with this is be open to it and be flexible to it. And keeping in mind that the main principle that has to be there is to make sure that the clients and their families ultimately benefit and are still able to benefit from the services that we provide, regardless of if it's regular microfinance or even climate response or climate finance for that matter.

Philippe Guichandut: Okay, so we need to be flexible. You want to add something?

Syrel Z. Aplaon: Yeah, I think just an additional, I think from the investor's point of view, when you look at microfinance and for NWTF, I'd rather say that it's important that you get to see the work that we do, to understand where we're coming from and why did we do it in the first place. Yes, it's risky because you don't know any time your money might be gone, but the point is when you put in money, it's not just putting in investment that just goes around in thin air. You're helping build the community where we are operating. You're being with us, partnering with us in creating this sustainable community, creating the future that you want to see as an investor. So, join us and don't be scared. Take the risk.

Philippe Guichandut: Okay, so I'm going to take the risk to come to the Philippines.

Raymond Patrick Serios: Yes, come on.

Philippe Guichandut: And anyway, it was really great, Raymond and Syrel. Great, and I think that it really opened our mind and I want to thank you and keep in touch and see you around.

Syrel Z. Aplaon: Yes, thank you so much.

Raymond Patrick Serios: Thank you very much, Philippe. Thank you very much to your followers, listeners.

Philippe Guichandut: We're going to meet and talk about other very exciting experiences with other partners.

Syrel Z. Aplaon: Yeah, we're more than happy. Thank you so much.

Raymond Patrick Serios: Thank you.