“Rubber is a plant that is forever.” This statement was popular during the centennial celebration of the rubber industry and the first International Rubber Conference held in Davao City on 22-24 November 2005.

With the upsurge of demand for rubber and its price escalating in the world market, it is easy to understand why scientists, smallholders, researchers, private sector, government agencies, and local government units (LGUs) as well as the international delegates during these two events were all dedicated in imparting valuable knowledge and experiences in planting and marketing their most important commodity—rubber.

Getting ahead

Fifty years into rubber industry, Mr. Onofre T. Griño, president of a Filipino private corporation, recalled how rubber production developed into a significant industry since its introduction in Mindanao.

“Rubber was introduced in the Philippines in the early 1900’s when the country is going through a difficult agricultural phase. The rubber manufactured as tires and shoes mostly came from Indonesia and Thailand. In the early 1920’s, rubber mills were established in Basilan, but it was only in the 1950’s when local private corporations embarked on setting up rubber processing plants in Mindanao. Today, large-scale rubber plantations such as Goodyear, Goodrich, and Firestone are well established in the country along with our local corporations such as the Menzi Corporation.”

Mr. Julian G. Sampayan, a rubber smallholder, has an inspiring story. He started planting rubber when he was already at a retired age of 65. Unimpressed by his pursuit, he was ridiculed by the locals, saying he cannot make it. Still, he persevered and exerted his best efforts to prosper in the rubber industry. Today, at 95, he remains as one of the most successful rubber growers in the country.
North Cotabato in Mindanao is one of the major rubber producing provinces in the Philippines. As one of its priority crops, Governor Emmanuel F. Piñol expressed the province’s commitment to expand the production of rubber. He stated that 25 million seedlings good for 50,000 hectares, are due for budding in their province.

In his speech, he announced that he was able to convince President Arroyo to recognize rubber as one of the priority crops in the country. “There are one million hectares of idle land in the country; about 500 million rubber trees can be planted in that expanse. This could mean a great deal for the country’s bid to compete in the global market. There would be about $2 billion of farm earnings and P2.5 billion in local taxes per year, not to mention the thousand jobs it can generate for the locals.”

He acknowledged the support extended by the Department of Agriculture (DA) in promoting rubber production in the country particularly in North Cotabato and Zamboanga Sibugay. In addition, he announced that the government of France through its ambassador is willing to renew its support to the rubber expansion program of North Cotabato.

The LGUs and the Department of Agriculture are one in saying that rubber is one of the most profitable agro-industrial crops in the Philippines and has a promising potential to be globally competitive.

“From 1991 to 1995, the rubber industry garnered 17 percent of the annual sales for agricultural products, contributing from P5.1 to P9 billion in total sales. In 1996, 40 percent of our natural rubber production was exported which raised our income from $10 million in 1986 to a whooping $34 million.

In 2000, we produced 6.6 million tons of natural rubber and by the year 2010, it is predicted that we could produce as much as 9.1 million tons”, reported Dir. Nicomedes P. Eleazar of the Bureau of Agricultural Research (BAR).

Agriculture Secretary Domingo F. Panganiban, on the other hand, stated that the DA strives to increase rubber production by 10 percent annually to expand our market. It also recommends integrated farming systems approach to achieve a 10 percent yearly raise in the income of rubber smallholders.
Demand for rubber

Dr. Eugenio A. Alcala, executive director of the Philippine Rubber Board, Inc. (PRBI) and over-all chairman of the event’s organizing committee, reported that there are more than 50,000 uses of rubber.

There are two kinds of rubber used in the manufacture of products: synthetic and natural rubber. Natural rubber is preferred since it is more durable, adhesive, and impermeable. The most popular product derived from natural rubber is of course automobile tires. According to Director Eleazar, 70 percent of the rubber industry supplies the tire sector.

Dr. Abdul Aziz Kadir, secretary general of the International Rubber Research and Development Board (IRRDB), Malaysia, asserted that the future is bright for the rubber industry because of its wide product range. He highlighted the market for birth control (condom), rubberwood (furniture), and the niche market for rubber-based products such as medical products (surgical gloves), foam mattresses, and even artificial flowers (roses).

Moreover, Dr. Ramli Othman of the Malaysian Rubber Board (MRB) said that there is an increasing demand for rubberwood as source of latex and timber. “We are promoting the planting of latex-timber clones in both conventional and forest rubber plantations. This will make rubber production a more competitive and attractive industry.”

In the study of rubber economics presented by Dr. Hidde Smit, secretary general of the International Rubber Study Group (IRSG) based in London, he reported that the Philippine rubber industry would be soaring high in the world market by the year 2020 compared to other rubber producing countries in Asia and in other parts of the world. This is because of our high production and consumption of natural rubber.

He also asserted that we could produce as much as 250-350 million tons of rubber in the coming years. “We expect prices to remain high”, said Dr. Smit when asked about the stability of the price of rubber in the world market.

According to his report, the competition would be up between the Philippines and Vietnam, which also shows a great potential in the rubber industry. On the other hand, China turns out to be the major consumer of rubber. Apparently, one-third of the world rubber production goes to the most populated country.

Strengthening alliances

Given the impressive potentials of Philippines rubber in the global market, it is surprising to note that the country is not a member of the two largest organizations on rubber in the world, the Association of Natural Rubber Producing Countries (ANPRC) and the IRSG. However, it is a member of IRRDB. DA-BAR’s Director Eleazar and PRBI’s Dr. Alcala sit as members of the board since 2000.
The ANRPC is an organization of the eight countries producing 80 percent of rubber in the world. These are Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand. It conducts world studies on rubber, coordinates international forum, and maintains the natural rubber statistics in the world.

The IRSG, on the other hand, provides a forum for the discussion of the world’s supply and demand for rubber. Its functions extend as far as studying the marketing, shipping, distribution, and trade of rubber. At present, it comprises of 16 member countries.

**Re-assess, resolve, revive**

After a hundred years in the industry, rubber as a priority commodity in the country has still plenty to accomplish. Critical issues are to be addressed to sustain the supply and demand of natural rubber and get a bigger slice of the cake in the global market.

The continuous support to rubber research, development, and extension needs to be intensified. In a survey conducted by Dr. Tenny Alcala of the University of Southern Mindanao among smallholders, majority of them gave a positive response to the prospect of establishing a Philippine Rubber Research Institute.

According to her, rubber stands out as a commercial crop in the Philippines because it is highly profitable, versatile, sustainable, and environmentally friendly. However, there are still several hurdles in the growth of our rubber industry, which we need to attend to. Some of these are the low yield per hectare due to poor management practices, poor nutritional condition of trees, lack of training for proper tapping (the method of extracting rubber sap from the tree), and poor infrastructure and marketing systems.

In the Philippines, 95 percent of rubber growers are smallholders. However, Dr. Tenny Alcala explains that only a fraction of these farmers receives suitable information about rubber production technologies through trainings, seminars, and meetings given by the local government and extension workers. It was also found that only a meager 2.4 percent of rubber tappers in the country are female, while in other rubber producing countries in Asia (Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam) majority of the tappers are women, who are believed to be fine tappers because of their efficiency and diligence.

In the conference, our local participants were able to mull over other options presented by other rubber producing countries such as the use of yield stimulants, recommended rubber clones, and other rubber processing technologies that can boost our own industry.

During the centennial celebration, Director Eleazar received an Outstanding Services Award under the category of Research and Development and another award for BAR under the category of Outstanding Institution/Agency.

The conference served as an opportunity to strengthen our existing alliance with the member countries of IRRDB and open our doors to new partnerships that will give us further access to the global market. The local participants especially the LGUs expressed their eagerness to pass a
resolution for the Philippines to become a member country to these organizations, as these would trigger the promotion and development of our rubber industry.

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