

Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program and the Seaweed Industry

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The Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program is a joint undertaking of the United States Agency for International Development (US AID) and the Office of the President that started in 1995 and will end by September 2002. It intends to achieve economic growth in Mindanao and help assure that the benefits of economic growth are widely distributed among the people of Mindanao by focusing on enterprise development, essential infrastructure, and needed policy changes. It works with multisectoral groups to bring about equitable economic growth and actively participates in the integration of marginalized religious and indigenous groups and women into the mainstream of economic development.

One of the sectors being assisted by the GEM Program where Mindanao is noted for is in fisheries and aquaculture. Western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, in particular, are noted for their rich and diverse marine resources and for the past thirty years have been the major source of the *Euचेuma/Kappaphycus* seaweed supplying 70% of the Philippines seaweed production. As part of achieving peace and development in the area in support of the September 1996 peace agreement, the GEM Program launched its Emergency Livelihood Assistance Program (ELAP) in 1997 that provided input assistance to 4,335 combatants of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to engage in seaweed production in 76 barangays in 26 municipalities in Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Basilan, Zamboanga City and the Zamboanga provinces. Total assistance extended amounted to more than PhP 80M. A sequel program is currently being finalized that will continue to provide assistance to seaweed farmers.

One of GEM's continuing thrusts is to provide assistance to business support organizations or BSOs. GEM is instrumental in the holding of the 1st Mindanao Seaweed Congress held in April 2000 in Zamboanga City which was attended by the seaweed industry players who realized the need to maintain and strengthen the Philippines' competitive edge against the growing international competition from neighboring Southeast Asian countries. The congress led to the organization of a BSO called the Western Mindanao Seaweed Industry Development Foundation Inc. (WMSIDFI) composed of stakeholders in the seaweed industry in Western Mindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. During the congress, a position paper indicating the strategies that would address the concerns of the seaweed industry was submitted to the Department of Agriculture (DA) for appropriate action. These strategies cover, among others, research and development (R&D) matters that have to be addressed to improve productivity of seaweed production areas and in expanding new product application of carrageenan.

GEM which has supported the WMSIDFI had again co-sponsored the holding of the 2nd Mindanao Seaweed Congress which was held on April 25-26, 2001 in Zamboanga City. In the

congress, a rundown of actions taken with regard to the position paper of the 1st Congress was done and a new set of resolutions was forwarded to the DA to oversee and monitor compliance to the resolutions. One of the resolutions is to support an applied research and development program for the seaweed industry involving DA, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), the Aquaculture Department of the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Centre (SEAFDEC), the Philippine Council for Aquatic and Marine Research and Development (PCAMRD), UP Marine Science Institute (UP-MSI) and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST). Again, concerns on improving productivity, disease-control, and new product applications as well as product quality control and management to conform with international standards have surfaced.

On-going research activities in Zamboanga City which is being conducted by UP-MSI is being assisted by the GEM Program in coordination with some of the ELAP beneficiaries. In addition, GEM with WMSIDFI are closely coordinating with various government, private institutions, and multi-donor agencies in tapping available human and financial resources that will help improve production and income to members of seaweed growers associations belonging to WMSIDFI and in enhancing their organizational capabilities.

GEM is also funding the update of the *Eucheuma/Carrageenan* Industry Situationer that was prepared by the University of Asia and the Pacific in 1997. This study is considered to be the most comprehensive industry study done so far and the update has included discussions on the other hydrocolloids or gums that are competing with carrageenan. The study is expected to be completed in November 2001.

It is mostly by providing coordinative and advocacy assistance and enhancing the institutional capabilities of WMSIDFI and its members that the GEM Program has assisted the Seaweed Industry.