

UNDERSTANDING THE ILOCANO CONCEPT OF 'THE GOOD LIFE' IN THE AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF ILOCOS SUR

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This study explores how local conditions shape a people's understanding of 'the good life' as contrasted with the 'hard' or 'difficult life'. In the context of agriculture and the changing landscape of Ilocos Sur, 'the good life'—"nasayaat a panagbiag"—is not a static notion. It is experienced by the Ilocanos of Santa Catalina within the confines of the agricultural cycle, ecological relations, and the seasons. It is also mediated by various situations such as: environmental changes, location of their farm lots, the other economic activities of people, and variability in the market prices of produce upon harvest. In this agricultural context, and taking into consideration the local conditions that determine what kind of life they may face later on, the 'hard' or 'difficult life' and the 'good life' are temporary states of being.

Keywords: *'The good life', Ilocos agriculture, Ilocano farmers*

Introduction

Described as "a narrow belt of discontinuous coastal lowlands intermittently interspersed by mountain spurs that descend directly to the coast from the hill and mountain lands in the interior" (Wernstedt & Spencer 1967:328), the Ilocos coast is more often than not characterized as a place of limited opportunities because of its geographical features. This is why the Ilocanos are often portrayed in the literature as a people forced to leave their place of origin, in search of a better place where they can experience a 'good life'. As their lives have improved by movement to other places, they then normally return to their hometown as *balikbayan*.

According to many Ilocano migration studies, experiencing a 'hard life' is usually the reason given by migrants for leaving Ilocos (e.g. Pe-Pua 1988, Pertierra 1992). Their depiction of the living conditions in Ilocos as difficult or "*narigat*" is often associated with lack of money, and this is the rationale

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for the persistence of overseas migration. The 'hard life' may be opposed to the enjoyment of "a materially comfortable lifestyle" that is observed to have been achieved by migrant workers (Pertiera 1992). Once able to access the economic opportunities that can provide financial capability to accumulate material wealth, an Ilocano can say that one has a 'good life.'

According to a study conducted among Ilocano peasants in Pangasinan, the 'good life' has two components: material and non-material gains (Florendo 1984). Material components of a "good life" refer to their desire for land ownership, since land is seen to be a major factor for the continued existence of the household. To summarize, Florendo's findings are:

The components of a good life or *nasayaat nga biag* from the Ilocano peasant's views include both material, immediate and long-term gains. The material aspect includes the desire to have a higher compensation and increased productivity and the desire to seek overseas employment. The non-material gains include maintaining good health and keeping at all times good relations with one's neighbours' and one's God. Education, as a life, merits both economic returns and non-material gains.

As prioritized by most of the peasants, ownership of land and the capability to provide college education for their children are the top ranking components of a good life. Land is not only an economic resource but is taken synonymously with the peasant household's survival. On the other hand, education is perceived to be the best long-term investment specifically for the peasant household's future security. The peasants believe that the above components of a good life can only be achieved through one's hard labor and industry (1984:abstract page).

This study problematizes the same notions further. What does having a 'good life' entail for an Ilocano peasant community? Why do they think that life in Ilocos is 'hard', such that the main way to have 'a good life' is to migrate? The decision to migrate, whether overseas or locally, is always justified as due to "*narigat nga panagbiag*" or a 'hard life' that is experienced in the Ilocos. How is the 'good life' that they dream of ("*nasayaat a panagbiag*" in the vernacular in Santa Catalina, Ilocos Sur) opposed to the 'hard life' ("*narigat a panagbiag*")? These questions are explored in the context of the changing ecological landscapes as well as of the agricultural experiences of the people.

Data collection methods. This study employed participant observation and in-depth interviews in the field as well as via electronic communications. In

conducting fieldwork the Ilocano language was the main medium. However, there were times when Tagalog was used, which happened in interacting with the locals and during interviews especially when they learned that I am a Manilaña (although with Ilocano parents). Many Ilocanos are conversant in Tagalog because it is taught in school and some of the respondents have been further exposed to the language through their employment experiences and from relatives in Manila.

I interviewed 64 people ranging in age from 13 to 82, coming from the different barangays in Santa Catalina, Ilocos Sur. Most of them had a migrant worker parent or sibling. Some were serving as guardians of migrant workers' children as well as caretakers of their houses. Others were husbands or wives of migrants, and some are migrants themselves.

Most of the people I talked with were engaged in farming. Those who held any kind of regular waged employment were usually also involved in farming activities. Some were also engaged in income-generating activities such as the selling of afternoon snacks and managing *sari-sari* stores, or peddling backyard-grown vegetables.

The research area. The study was conducted in the Municipality of Santa Catalina in the province of Ilocos Sur. Ilocos Sur is bounded on the north by the province of Ilocos Norte, on the east by the provinces of Abra and Mountain Province, on the south by the province of La Union, and on the west by the South China Sea. Its southwestern part is hilly and mountainous, while its eastern part is a coastal plain, which is primarily devoted to rice cultivation. The Municipality of Santa Catalina is bounded by the municipalities of San Vicente (north), Bantay (east), and Vigan (south) (see Figure 1 on p.47). The town was established upon its discovery at the time of the Spanish conquest. Since then many areas have been cleared for agricultural use as rice fields and fish ponds. Today most of the roads are concretized, and many of the houses built have modern designs replicating those in foreign lands.

In Santa Catalina, people often describe life in Ilocos as "*narigat*", which is reflected in some remarks or expressions such as: "*narigat iti biag ditoy (idjay) Ilocos*," 'life here (there) in Ilocos is hard (or difficult)'. In attempting to define the "*nasayaat nga panagbiag*" or 'good life' for me they inevitably contrasted it with "*narigat nga panagbiag*". This article presents how locals describe Santa Catalina and their perceptions of their life in the community. Discussion will mainly focus on how the 'good' and 'hard' life are characterized and shaped by changing socio-economic conditions, such as agricultural and ecological changes.

Life in Santa Catalina: seasonal climate and a changing ecology

Santa Catalina has two distinct seasons: wet and dry. Wet season usually starts at the onset of May and ends in the early part of October. The rest of the year is noticeably dry. During dry season, especially in the early months, farmers depend on irrigation. At the peak of the dry season, water is drawn using water pumps. A feature of the agriculture in Ilocos is the need for additional inputs such as fertilizers to improve the productivity of the land. During the wet season, the area is often visited by typhoons that may destroy their produce.

Severe deforestation of the Ilocos region has been observed (Wernstedt & Spencer 1967:331), and this was reported to me by many of the locals in Santa Catalina as well. Community members coming from different parts of the municipality said that many trees have disappeared since the 1950s. One reason that they were cut down was to open areas for planting vegetable crops and rice. Other trees were cut down because they blocked the sunlight for the growing crops.

Santa Catalina has a total land area of 934 hectares. About 75% of this area (696.59 ha.) is utilized for croplands. The other parts are devoted to residential (9.45%) and for other land uses (15.97%) which include commercial, institutional, industrial, roads, parks/open spaces, rivers/fishponds, and tourism zones, according to the Municipal and Planning Development Office (MPDO).

The main economic activity in the municipality is agriculture. Most members of the community are into farming, others maintain fishponds or are engaged in fishing in the sea. Even people working as professionals are still part-time farmers. They engage in the various agricultural activities before and or after their office work. People have also traditionally pursued other occupations such as fishing (second to agriculture in economic importance), textile production (weaving of *abel Iloko*), salt production, and pottery.

The farmer's primary crop is rice during wet season, followed by corn. During dry season, farmers plant white corn and vegetables such as onions, cabbage, cauliflower, sweet pepper, eggplant, beans, tomato, sweet potato, yam beans, mungo and peanuts. Since agricultural land is limited, intercropping is observed. The municipality boasts of its title as the "Vegetable Bowl of the North".

As reported on the municipality's website (Sta. Catalina 2008), livestock or poultry are commonly raised in the backyard and usually these are not for

profit sale. Cows and water buffalos are raised mainly to assist the farmers in their farm work. Other animals such as goats and chicken are also raised but for household consumption only.

Fishponds are also visible in almost every barangay in Santa Catalina. Milkfish are raised in the brackish ponds, and *tilapia* in freshwater. The municipal fishing grounds are within 15 kilometers from the shoreline of the coastal barangays, and 'communal fishing grounds' are situated along Govantes River (Sta. Catalina 2008). Among the marine aquatic produce are *malaga* (*Siganus vermiculatus* or vermiculated spinefoot rabbitfish), crabs (*arimbukeng*), shrimp, oysters and seaweeds.

Aside from farming, fishing, and working in existing local industries, community members also seek employment in Vigan, the capital of Ilocos Sur. Others go to neighboring provinces or to Manila, as well as abroad, to seek employment. These may be temporary or seasonal workers, or permanent migrants.

Decline of local industries. Several small- and medium- scale industries are present in the municipality. One of them is the light-medium bamboo craft industry located in Barangay Pangada. It exports its finished products. This industry recently slowed down in its production because of the dwindling availability of raw materials.

Lusob, or 'well-ring' making, used to be a thriving industry in Santa Catalina. Rings made out of a mixture of cement, rocks and sand are used to line dug up wells or are sometimes only placed at the mouth of the wells. Locals as well as farm-owners in other municipality or provinces would go to Santa Catalina to buy *lusob*. Through time, numerous deep wells within the municipality and in neighboring areas have been dug. When this industry was at its peak, a *lusob*-maker told me that he could sell 50 to 60 *lusob* a week. Now however, they barely sell 10 pieces in a week. One reason for this is the introduction of modern technology for getting water, such as water pumps, and the introduction of local water services in the community.

Other industries present are gravel-and-sand businesses and metal crafts. There is an existing cigar industry in the municipality. However, it may soon close shop because of the lack of raw materials, i.e. native tobacco (Sta. Catalina 2008).

Aside from these industries, which are on the brink of extinction, at least one has stopped its operation. The municipality used to have an onion dehydration plant, which "pulverized onion that was exported to different Asian countries" (Sta. Catalina 2008). The primary reason mentioned for its

closure was the fluctuation in the value of the dollar. The salt-making industry is currently endangered due to loss of land to the sea (this will be discussed further in the succeeding sections).

Backyard industries present in the municipality include family enterprises that focus on meat products (fresh meat cuts, Ilocos *longanisa* and *bagnet*) and local meat dishes, such as *dinakdakan* (grilled pig head/face) and *dinardaraan* (blood stew), and noodles (*miki*) traditionally served in such occasions as birthdays, *paluwalo* (praying as the main activity of the gathering; usually done for thanksgiving, after a wedding, after a funeral, and other important occasions), or as simple *miryenda* (snacks).

Demographic change in Santa Catalina. Santa Catalina is subdivided into nine barangays, namely: Cabaroan, Cabittaogan, Cabuloan, Pangada, Paratong, Poblacion, Sinabaan, Subec and Tamorong; and has three *sitio* or outlying settlements, namely: Calawaan in Barangay Tamorong, Mindanao (formerly called Sabangan) in Barangay Paratong, and Punta in Barangay Cabittaogan. Ilocano is the major language spoken in the area, though there is also an observed percentage of the presence of other languages. Tagalog/Filipino is the second most spoken language in the area. Almost everyone can converse in this language since it is also used as medium of instruction in school. Some of the other languages starting to be heard now in Santa Catalina are B'laan, Hantikanon, Ibanag, Kankaney, Rombloanon and Waray. This is due to in-migration primarily brought about by intermarriage with people from the other regions.

Table 1. Santa Catalina Population Growth

Year	Population	Increase or Decrease	Ave. Growth Rate
1903	5625		
1918	6,494	869	1.03
1939	6,495	1	0.00
1948	7,125	630	1.08
1960	8,414	1,289	1.51
1970	8,921	507	0.60
1975	9,391	470	1.05
1980	9,761	370	0.79
1990	11,388	1,627	1.67
1995	11,228	(160)	(0.26)
2000	12,537	1,309	2.33

(Source: Sta. Catalina MPDO)

The population is predominantly Roman Catholic (98%), followed by those belonging to the Iglesia ni Cristo (less than 1%); the rest belong to other denominations. In 2007, according to the Municipal and Planning Development Office records, Santa Catalina had 2,204 households.

As seen in Table 1, the population of Santa Catalina has not grown much, reiterating the observation made by Xenos (1998) on the broader population of the Ilocos Region through time. One probable reason for this is the continuous outmigration from the town to neighboring provinces, to Manila, to other regions as far as Mindanao, or to foreign countries.

Loss of land to the sea. Local folks remember huge sand dunes located along the shorelines of Santa Catalina. The sand dunes are believed by some members of the community to protect the coastal communities from huge waves during typhoons. However, through time many of the sand dunes have disappeared.

Sometime in the past, gold panning along the shore was introduced to the community and became an alternative source of income until people observed the disappearance of sand dunes. Today, noticeably vast portions of land have already disappeared, including residential lots, rice fields and fishponds, and people link this to gold panning. Gold panning is presently prohibited in the municipality to avoid further damage to the shoreline. The color of the sand in Santa Catalina ranges from light gray to dark gray to black, similar to iron fillings. According to the MPDO of Santa Catalina, some of the minerals found in the sand are manganese, silica and black ore. During the time of the fieldwork, another ecological problem perceived by some of the locals was suspected illegal black sand mining along its seashore. At present, restoration efforts are being exerted to areas affected (PNA 2013).

According to the locals, the seashore has become significantly narrower compared to how it was in the 1950s. There are key landmarks that have disappeared, or have been 'taken' by the sea, including a chapel, a vast number of houses, some parts of Barangays Paratong and Subec, and other properties such as farmlands and fishponds. Many believe that this happened because 'the sea got angry' over the abuse of the environment, primarily referring to the sand dunes.

Comparing available maps of the fieldwork area from the late 1940s to 2009, there is a noticeable erosion of the shoreline since (see Figure 1). Although at the moment, there can only be speculation on the real cause of this phenomenon of seashore erosion, locals would perceive that this is due to inappropriate extraction of their resources such as gold panning. It is

possible that this phenomenon may be attributed to various geological forces such as wind and water erosion; it may also be due to global warming, as identified in other places that experience the same phenomenon.

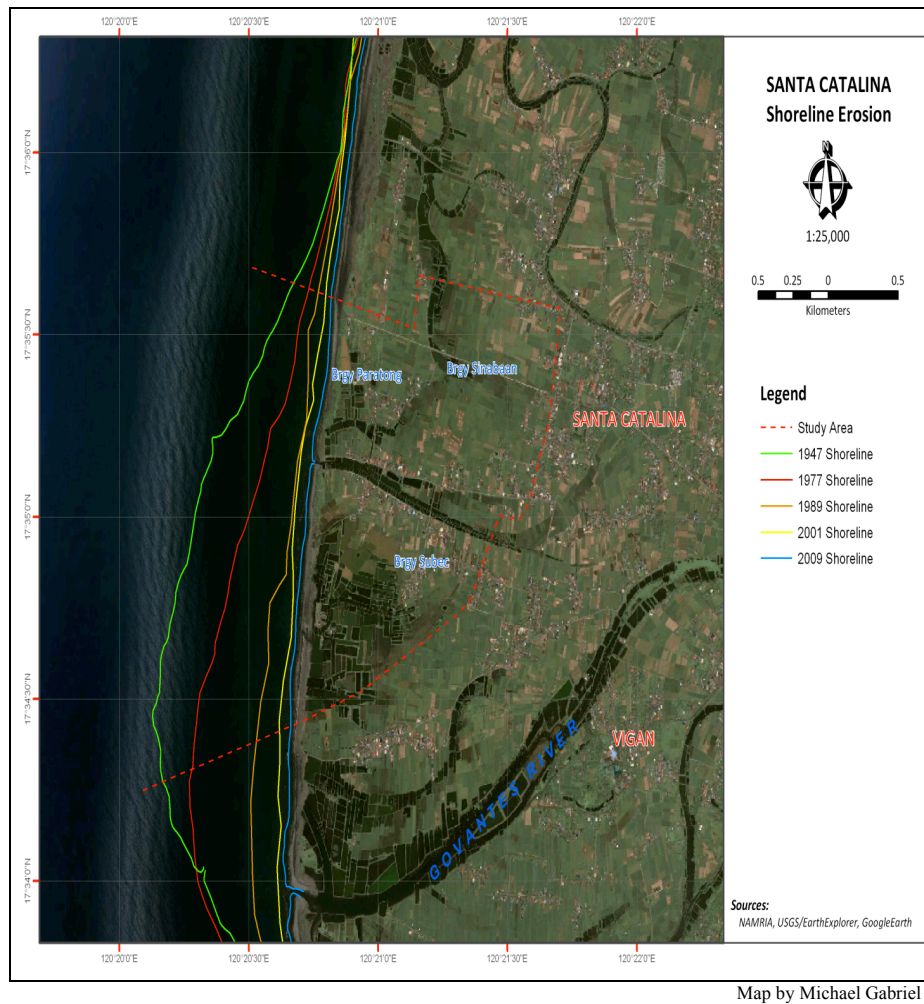


Figure 1. Map of Santa Catalina showing shoreline erosion through time

Water problems. In Santa Catalina, there is a noticeably huge number of “*bubon*” or wells scattered throughout the area. The presence of many water wells shows their importance to the community since there are no irrigation facilities in the area. It can be observed that a number of water wells are scattered in fields that are not far from each other. Some landowners and or

farm managers have dug wells as accessible water sources for their own fields. There are instances when two adjacent fields have two different water sources.

Ilocos “has one of the highest ratios of irrigated land to total cultivated land of any region in the Philippines” (Wernstedt & Spencer 1967:330-1). Jocano (1982) has also observed that when the rivers dry up at the height of the dry season in Ilocos, ground water is tapped through water pumps. The municipality is said to have a +3 elevation, which according to an MPDO official, enables people to easily tap the water table. For the irrigation of the land, water from the well is drawn out either manually or using an electric water pump. Other water sources aside from the water wells are deep wells where some also get their drinking water. There are households that also have their own water wells or pumps as source of water for their own consumption.

What is the status of water aquifers if farmers are pumping fresh water for irrigation? With the increasing number of these wells present, another observed ecological problem that affects local agricultural production is saltwater intrusion, which happens when too much ground water has been pumped out from the well. Water from the sea then intrudes into the water table, thus affecting the taste of the water, which is observed to have slowly become more and more salty. With this situation, the local government initiated a move to bring potable drinking water to the community through a local water provider. Purified drinking water is also now a thriving business in the municipality. Most of the households buy their supply of potable drinking water from these business establishments.

The salt water intrusion has also been blamed for the stunted growth of many crops in the locality.

Pesticide and fertilizer use. As early as the 1950s (perhaps even earlier) the use of synthetic chemicals became a part of farming activities in Santa Catalina. Over time, the use of chemicals has intensified such that during the late 1980s up to mid 1990s, residents would complain about the odor stemming from the constant use of these chemicals. Some are not even comfortable eating their own vegetable produce due to the chemicals used as fertilizer and pesticide.

According to the MPDO, the over-use of chemicals for agricultural purposes has made the soil acidic. This eventually affected the ground water as well. As explained to me by the MPDO officer, chemicals absorbed by the soil seep into the ground water that is extracted through water wells and pumps and is then again used to irrigate the land.

Because of the unfavorable effects of such farming practices to the environment and to their productivity, the local government of Santa Catalina has initiated a call for shifting towards organic farming. The farmers are encouraged to practice the use of organic fertilizers to avoid the damaging effects of commercial petrochemicals. The municipality has established “demo farms” located in different barangays of the municipality to show how organic farming is done and its potential for achieving a good harvest. The program according to MPDO is so far slowly implemented but will run until such time when most of the farmers have shifted to organic farming.

Farming as laborious work vulnerable to market forces

Farming itself as a kind of work is seen as inherently ‘hard’ (*narigat*) because of its ‘laborious’ nature. One needs to wake up early in the morning to go to the field to do the various activities such as plowing, planting the seedlings, watering the crops and spreading fertilizer on the soil, weeding, and harvesting. With the hot climate in Ilocos, many are up early to start working in their fields or cleaning the backyard to finish before the day reaches its highest temperature. Maintaining a farm needs so much manual work, which drains the body physically, as well as one’s financial resources if labor hiring is resorted to.

Farming as a source of income is seen as potentially profitable yet also as inherently ‘insufficient’ compared to other types of employment. Farmers do not enjoy a regular income from the field. They need to wait for some time to enjoy the fruits of their labor (if there be any), either in the form of good crops or a profit from selling them. ‘It is better to have a regular job because you are assured of a regular income,’ a 40 year-old migrant returnee who decided to come home for good told me, ‘and besides, you also receive benefits (such as a pension) when you grow old.’ Those who have a regular salary from jobs in the government or in private companies are thus sometimes seen to have already have a ‘good life’ or “*nasayaat nga panagbiag*” because they are not exposed to the sweltering heat of the sun, do not exert so much physical effort in their work, and do not worry much about how and where to get money.

Life here in Santa Catalina ‘is really hard’, I was told by an LGU employee, ‘*because almost everybody is a farmer*’. ‘Now, when they sell their produce, and it so happens that the price is low, then of course their earnings would be low as well,’ she added, ‘that’s why they say life is ‘hard’.’

Talagang mahirap ang buhay dito sa Santa Catalina, kasi lahat ng mga tao ay magsasaka. Karamihan ng mga tao dito ay their source

of good is through farming. *Kaya, alam mo naman 'pag farming, eh umaasa lang sa kung ano ang makikita nila sa pagsasaka. Ngayon pag magbenta sila, at kung magkataon na mura, mababa ang presyo, syempre kakaunti lang ang kita nila. That's why sinasabi nila na 'mahirap ang buhay'.*

Some of the Ilocanos that I talked with suggest that among those who experience a 'good life' are those who own vast farm lands. These lands can be rented out or placed under the care of local farm tenants or farm managers, who pay the landowner a monthly or yearly rent, depending on their contractual agreement. The tenant also gives a portion of his harvest (locally called *abang*) to the landowner that may range from 25% to 40% of the total produce.

From the start of the planting season until harvest time, expenses are incurred. The expenses would depend on the type of crop to be planted and the land area of the farm. Table 2 shows sample expenses for one crop cycle. Field preparation is made by plowing the soil with the use first of a tractor (which is normally rented for around six thousand pesos per hectare of field); this is to pulverize the soil for easy planting. Then it will be plowed by means of a cow to level the field and to form plots where seedlings are planted and canals for water management. Next, seedlings are bought. Fertilizers together with pesticides and herbicides are then applied to the crops. In a crop cycle, when watering the field, water is pumped out from deep wells. They do this three times within a fortnight or 14-day period. A scheduled day for watering the field may consume about 13 kilowatt hours (at ₱15 per kilowatt, a total of ₱195 per day or ₱585 in a fortnight). Laborers are hired for daily tasks on the farm, which include planting, weeding, watering the crops, applying fertilizers and pesticides, harvesting and packing of the produce. The cost of plastic bags used for packing is shouldered by the buyer of the produce. Approximately 32 days of daily-waged labor is needed for one crop cycle of around 45 days which may cost ₱200 pesos a day excluding the two free snacks and lunch and possibly an additional drinking session towards the end of the day.

High-yielding crops are attained with the use of fertilizers (organic and inorganic) and proper irrigation. Given that the province is not devastated by a typhoon while waiting for the harvest, the farmers closely monitor the market price of their goods. With a calculated 'good price' anticipated at the time of the harvest, the yield is eagerly awaited. In order to determine whether one gains or not, farm inputs are computed against the selling price of the produce in the market at the time of its harvest.

Table 2. Estimated Farming Costs/Hectare/Crop Cycle (2012 prices)

Farm inputs	Estimated cost
Field preparation	Tractor - ₱6,000.00 Cow – ₱800.00
Seedlings (e.g. cauliflower ₱800/50g)	4 x 50g = ₱3,200.00
Fertilizers (₱1,300 x 3 bags)	₱3,900.00
Pesticides and herbicides	₱8,000.00
Farm labor from planting to harvest (₱200/day per person, 3 laborers x 32 days)	₱19,200.00
Electricity for the water pump (₱585/fortnight x 5 fortnights/crop cycle)	₱2,925
TOTAL	₱44,025.00

‘Luck’, considered to be another component in farming, would mean harvesting good quality and high yielding crops and matching these with a good price in the market. To have the ‘good life’ during the dry season then is to chance upon a good market price for the harvested crops. This will dictate whether a farmer earns, breaks even or, worse, gets bankrupt. The business of farming is also seen as a gamble.

As a rule of thumb, ‘good market price’ means that the selling price of the produce to be bought by the trader from the farmer is at least three pesos per kilo (₱3/kilo). This is seen as ‘lucky’ because some earning is already guaranteed. On the other hand, a price of two pesos per kilo indicates break even, and lower than that indicates a big loss. In cases where it is already forecasted that they will go bankrupt, some farmers do not wait for their crops to ripen. Instead, the crops would be destroyed and mixed into the soil to serve as fertilizer for the next crop. Bankruptcy then would mean *narigat nga biag*, they will have a ‘hard life’ not only that particular season but for the next and other seasons to come as well.

The farmers may spend a lot on the inputs without knowing what the price of their produce will be. With the hope that their farming venture would be profitable, a farmer who has limited capital to spend for the additional inputs in the farm resorts to borrowing from different sources, either from relatives, lending institutions, or usurers. If a farmer is lucky enough to gain profit come harvest time, all would be well. If not, the more he will experience the ‘hard life’ since there is no way of recouping what has been spent on the farm. The farmer has to seek a loan again and hope to be able to repay the debts next time.

The out-migration of some Santa Catalina farmers to neighboring municipalities and provinces because of marriage (*"naikamang iti sa bali nga lugar"*) is also seen as a reason for the 'hard life' among farmers. In the 1950s – 1970s farming was considered a profitable endeavour because most of the cash crops such as cauliflower, cabbage, and onions, among others, were produced mainly in Santa Catalina. But when these farmers left, they brought with them the farming technology and knowhow of the locality. The places to which they moved started to plant and harvest similar crops thus causing an oversupply or surplus of similar vegetable produce in the market. Following the law of supply and demand, the farmers of Santa Catalina experienced a series of years of bankruptcy from planting the crops that used to bring cash to their homes.

In relation to this dilemma, another local problem mentioned is lack of 'zoning' in planting their crops. One farmer stated that one should not plant whatever he feels like planting but should decide on what crops to plant also in relation to what is to be planted in the neighboring municipalities.

There is a tendency for the locals to replant the crops that brought profits in the previous season instead of different crops. (For example, if cauliflower had been profitable one season, then everyone may decide to raise cauliflowers.) This tends to result to an oversupply of one kind of produce, thus leading to a drop in prices.

Ang isa sa nakikita kong problema dito wala yung . . . zoning. Sa ganitong baryo dapat iba't ibang klase tinatanim . . . ang nangyayari kung anong kumita noon yun ang uulitin. Halos lahat na lang ng mga tao yun ang itatanim, so yun ang cause ng pagbagsak ng presyo . . . Tsaka, . . . marami ka na nagastos, hindi mo pa alam kung anong magiging presyo nun. Kaya sa ngayon unpredictable na. Hindi kagaya noon na ang farmers, 'pag sinabi mong farmer sa Santa Catalina mayayaman, sa ngayon mahirap nang sabihin na ganon . . . napakahirap ng buhay ng mga farmers dito -a son of a farmer-trader, now a part-time farmer

Another recognized issue is the ratification of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1994, which enabled the entry of cheaper foreign goods; this move of the government has affected farmers not only in Ilocos but also all over the country. As recalled by a local, farmers used to enjoy high prices for their vegetables. However, with the ratification of the GATT, the prices of their vegetables were affected. One concrete example given is the proliferation of the large Taiwan garlic in the market, which is a lot cheaper than the small Ilocos garlic. Even if the Ilocos garlic is more

aromatic than the Taiwan garlic, many consumers would prefer to buy the latter because of its cheap price.

Some of the farmers do shift to other crops. One case is a farmer who planted corn instead of cauliflower and cabbages. His main reason for opting to plant corn is the cheaper maintenance of the crop. Corn does not need so much monitoring from pests and insects; it just needs to be watered once in a while, and allowed to grow.

The weather is also considered a factor that may affect the price of their crops. During rainy season there are few buyers. To avoid spoilage of their harvested crops, farmers are forced to sell their produce at a low price.

A former trader recalled that from the 70s to the 90s trading for agricultural produce was a financially rewarding endeavour. She boasted that traders could earn more than the salary of those working in offices, sometimes three times as much. They would go to Manila to trade only on scheduled days so there were days when they did not have to go to Manila. She observed that the high earnings that they enjoyed before are seldom experienced at the present because traders now transport their goods to Manila every day.

The seasonality of the ‘good life’

Of the two pronounced seasons in the Ilocos region, it is felt that it is in the dry season that a ‘good life’ can usually be experienced. During the dry season, people are more mobile and are involved in various activities that are of economic gain. It is also during the dry season when a variety of cash crops are planted and harvested at least twice. The ‘good life’ is associated with *gasat* or ‘luck’ (a favourable condition) especially during harvest time. One can be said *nagasat* if the harvested crop is in good condition and will fetch a ‘good market price’. On the other hand, the wet season is synonymous with a ‘hard life’ to many in the community. With the expected series of rains, farmers and any people who are engaged in or dependent on farming experience some sort of immobility. Many have said that one is more likely to experience a ‘hard life’ when there is a lack of economic activity.

Dry season. The dry season starts in October. When the fields have dried from the rains of the previous season, and after the rice (*pagay*) has been harvested, farmers start to plant different crops. Until the end of April or mid May, they grow vegetables such as cauliflower (“*cauli*”), cabbage (*repolyo*), onions (*lasona*), garlic (*bawang*), bell peppers (*taban*), tomatoes (*kamatis*), and corn (*mais*). The dry season is a busy period for the locals. While

waiting for the crops to mature, the locals' everyday activities include watering of the crops, checking for pest infestation, and applying fertilizers and pesticides. I noticed that almost every field was planted with vegetables.

Around the end of November or early December there is an observed increase in the activity of the locals. Mature crops are selected from among those ready to be harvested. The produce is packed in large plastic bags or rice sacks to be taken to areas from where they would be picked up by traders – such as the farmer-tenants' garage, an outpost, or a place by the side of the street. The produce is usually then transported to neighboring provinces and to Metro Manila.

The month of December witnesses the first harvest for the season. In the late 1980s to early 2000, Santa Catalina residents considered this month as one of the best times of the year, since prices of commodities are high, and many farmers earn big profits. Additional work opportunities also exist as harvesters, baggers of crops and carriers of produce (*kargador*) are needed. One activity during the Christmas break is the cleaning of the newly harvested onions. The houses of families with a large harvest of onions are packed with people who help in cleaning and arranging onions to be transported to other provinces as well as to Manila.

While such activities are taking place, other farmers are also busy harvesting crops like cauliflower and cabbage. Traders meanwhile move around the community, picking up what they can to sell in other places. In the Ilocos, these traders or middlemen are seen to have the command of the marketing of farmers' produce. Traders would communicate with vegetable retailers in Manila and ask about the current selling price. Upon learning the existing prices, they would compute all the expenses to be incurred in transporting the crops to Manila and then pose the necessary buying price for their harvest. Whatever the trader says, the farmer agrees to, otherwise his crops won't be sold. The harvested crops are usually transported by the traders / middlemen in small cargo trucks, and even ten-wheeler trucks when the farmland is large.

Meanwhile, the farmers who have finished clearing their fields right away start planting the next crop. Two to three croppings can take place, one after the other, until the onset of the wet season.

Harvest time is a much-awaited activity in the community, especially when one chances upon a good market price (*nu matiempuam iti nasayaat nga presyo*). Getting a good price for one's harvest means cash for everyday expenses, and funds for the next planting season. In short, a 'good life' (*nasayaat nga panagbiag*) through the dry season and, hopefully, through the

next season too. Figure 2 summarizes the seasonal activities of the Ilocanos in Santa Catalina.

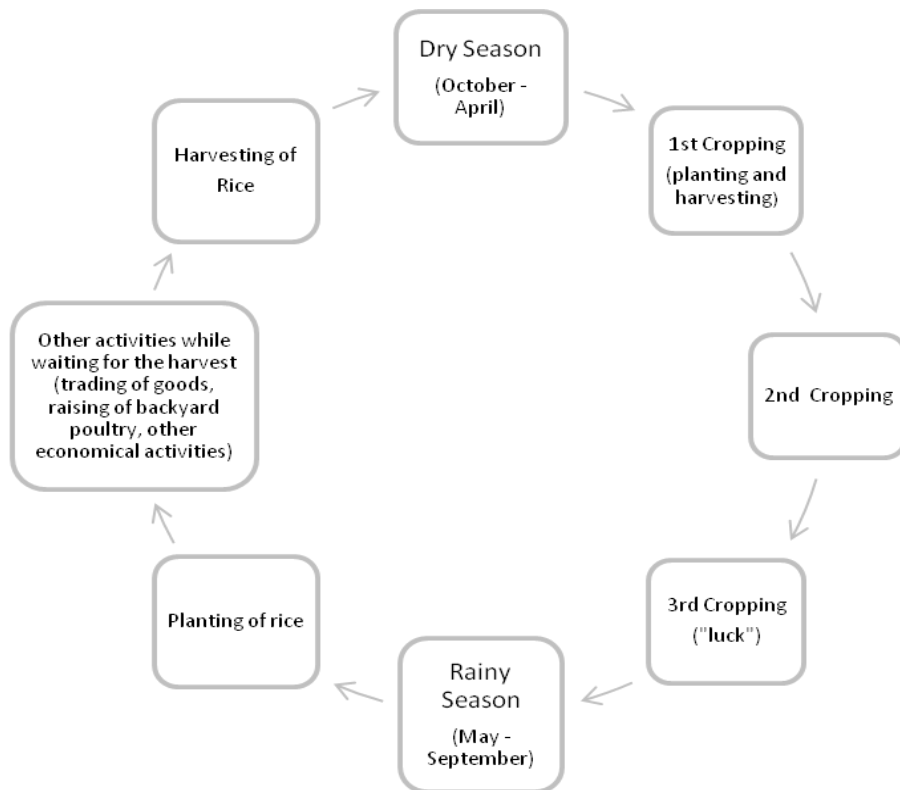


Figure 2. Seasonal Activities in Santa Catalina

For fishermen, the dry season is also a good season because it is the time when they can go out to exploit the resources of the sea. At the onset of the dry season, the fish pens are still full of water, and the fish are ready for harvest. Towards the end of the dry season, when water in the fish pens is visibly almost dried up, fingerlings are slowly being purchased. This is in preparation for the onset of the rainy season.

Wet season. The wet season starts with the first rain of May. During this time, rice is the main crop planted by the community. In Santa Catalina, rice is planted primarily for home consumption and not for trading. However, a

few farmers sell their rice, especially those who have harvested more than what can be consumed for the whole year (cf Nydegger & Nydegger 1966).

The wet season, characterized by regular visits of typhoons that usually destroy agricultural produce, is sometimes described as the time when many experience the 'hard' or 'difficult' life. The regular rains may limit the locals' economic activity, leaving them with nothing much to do but to wait for their (rice) crops to mature and be harvested. However, too much rain can be harmful to the crops, it may cause them to rot.

On the other hand, with the regular rains, farmers don't need to exert much effort in maintaining the rice fields since there is abundance of water. Likewise, the rains and typhoons may cause fish pens to overflow, causing a breakout of the fishes. Some of the old folk make mention of crablets and other fishes (*tilapia*, milkfish) that are scattered after the heavy rain, thus giving the community a free supply of food.

Since the rainy season sometimes causes many of the farmers to be immobile, some of those who have saved enough during the previous season just stay at home or resort to drinking and gambling.

A full-time farmer who was a bachelor in his early 50s told me that there were only few farming activities he would do during the rainy season, especially if he had earned enough from the previous season. Since rice, the primary crop for this time of the year, does not require so much attention, he had a lot of free time in his hands. During this season, he would simply visit his crops and participate in drinking and card playing sessions with his friends.

However, these activities give some people a negative impression of the farmer. For Ilocanos, 'doing nothing' is seen as a sign of laziness. Ilocanos see themselves as 'hardworking by nature'; one is supposed to keep busy when there are few opportunities to earn, and must not allow oneself to become idle. One is expected to work harder during hard times in order to achieve a 'good life' and especially if the farmer did not earn much in the previous season.

Since there is no assurance that one's farming venture would be profitable, many farmers exert extra effort to earn additional money to sustain the family's everyday needs. Rainy season or not, the local folks, especially those who have a family with children being sent to school, would take on extra work on the side throughout the year, such as trading products from other provinces or livestock-raising. They buy poultry and livestock that can be raised and sold later. Some would go around peddling vegetables

harvested from their own backyard. Others would go fishing, while others would seek employment as farm laborers or domestic helpers.

Elevation and drainage of fields

Another factor seen to affect the attainment of the 'good life' by local farmers is the location of their fields. A field in the "*bangkag*" which has a higher elevation, is usually a preferred farm location because crops planted there do not suffer from too much water. The excess water goes down to the lower part of the land, the "*alog*".

Farmers and/or farm owners with lands located in a *bangkag* can conduct more crop cycles than those located in the *alog*. This is because during rainy season, the crops planted in the *alog* may soak up too much water that causes them to rot. Sometimes, at the onset of the dry season, farmers would wait for the excess water in their fields in the *alog* to subside or drain away before they can prepare for planting a new crop. For those with fields located in a *bangkag*, no time is wasted waiting for the right time to plant the next crop. Sometimes, farmers planting in the *bangkag* are already ready to harvest their first crop, while those in the *alog* are only starting to plant theirs. Usually three croppings could be done in the *bangkag*, while only two crops could be harvested in the *alog*. Farmers that work on the *bangkag* have a better chance to earn from farming.

Changing the course of farming life in Santa Catalina

The dwindling soil productivity together with the ecological changes that happened in the area, as recognized in the earlier part of this study, have led the farmers to face various challenges affecting their economic situation. In response to this, the local government initiated the raising of organic vegetables, in support of the One Town One Product Program, which allows a town to somehow 'own' or be identified with a particular product. This would somehow create a town's monopoly on certain products and help ensure a steady income for the community.

Though still in its beginning stage at the time of this study, the local government unit at the municipal level envisions to becoming a source of organically grown vegetables. Thus, local farmers are encouraged to adopt the recently introduced organic farming methods. While there are some members of the community who are still hesitant to adopt the method, the LGU is hopeful that eventually, local farmers will see its benefits. At the moment, demo farms employing organic farming methods have been established in various parts of the municipality to show local farmers the positive effects of organic farming. One reason for its promotion is to

prevent the further degradation of the soil through the use of chemical fertilizers. Besides, organically grown vegetables can be sold at a higher price. If gradually, organic farming methods, such as mixing animal manure and plant waste (like the leaves of harvested crops) with the soil and lessening the use of chemical fertilizers, would be practiced by all farmers, its full implementation is seen to bring new hope to an LGU that is agriculture dependent.

Conclusion: the 'good life' as part of the agricultural cycle in Ilocos

In the context of Ilocos agriculture and the changing ecological landscape of the community, it can be said that the 'good life' (alternating with the 'hard life') is something to be experienced cyclically and seasonally. It is also dependent on the laborious nature of farming.

The 'good life' for this instance is seen as almost synonymous with the enjoyment of economic gains from the said venture. However, in the achievement of economic gains through farming, there are a lot of factors that interplay such as: ecological changes, type of produce, season, market forces (pricing of goods based on supply and demand), field location, and also agreements entered into. The local government's participation in the One Town One Product Program provides a venue to innovate and upgrade their local agricultural industry. This has led them to start promoting organic farming as well as organic produce. Though not yet fully implemented, leaders are looking forward to the full participation of local farmers in its implementation for their benefit as well as of the whole municipality.

Table 3. Matrix of the Ilocano 'Good Life'

'Good Life' <i>Nasayaat nga panag-biag</i>	'Hard Life' <i>Narigat nga panag-biag</i>
Ecological / Environmental Conditions	
- Dry season	- Wet season - Loss of land to the sea
Economic Activity: Source of Income / type of work	
- Regular waged employee (government and/or private employee such as teacher, office worker) - Migrant worker	- Farming / farmer - Fishing / fisherman

Agriculture / Farming during the dry season

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start of planting for the third cropping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planting time - Farming activities are arduous - Cash flow is going out (money/capital is spent on seedlings, fertilizer, hiring of labourers, irrigation, electricity, rent for tractor or cow, etc.)
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Agriculture / Farming during the 'wet season'

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enough cash to spend for the rainy season due to good price of harvest during the dry season - Crops harvested before typhoon could destroy them - Minimum destruction of crops during typhoon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bankrupt status as a result of low income from the harvest during the dry season - Destruction of crops due to typhoon
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Farm lot location (elevation and drainage)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Farm lot located at the <i>bangkag</i> (high elevation, good drainage) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Farm lot located at the <i>alog</i> (low areas)
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Harvest time

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Good market price' / "<i>Naitama iti presyo</i>" (price of harvested crops is at least ₱3/kilo) - Usually the months of November, December, March, May 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Low market price' / "<i>Nababa iti presyo</i>" (price of harvested crop is at ₱2/kilo (break-even for the farmer) or below (bankruptcy for the farmer)) - Usually the months of January – February
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As the ethnographic data suggest, the main livelihood then and now in Ilocos has always been agriculture. Ilocanos are very much aware of the transformations of the land that they till from overharvesting of water from the aquifers, extensive use of toxic pesticide, deforestation, etc. In step with the dictates of nature, the land is seen to be the primary determiner of man's fate, and of whether one may achieve the 'good life.' Separating themselves from the land by the decision to migrate, would mean taking a different way to arrive at the 'good life'.

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