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## Maria's Sisters: A Rice Crisis

Joy Ibarra, president of Maria's Sisters, was trying to start a livelihood project<sup>1</sup>, a rice retail business, for the benefit of her organization's members. She felt hopeful and excited as she saw immense potential in the project as rice was a staple product in the country.

But her excitement cooled as she met with her first disappointment. After distributing fifteen 25-kilogram rice sacks to the women, she discovered that instead of selling the rice, the women had cooked it and fed it to their families. Frustrated and puzzled, she held a meeting to understand why this happened and whether or not the women thought the rice was a donation.

Determined, Joy ordered a second batch of rice sacks, but this time she would make sure she thoroughly explained to the women that this was for a livelihood project. Joy organized a question and answer forum, but once it began, the women started voicing their concerns and disagreements. Some saw the amount of rice distributed as too meager to begin a business, while others wanted a completely different project. Worse, they now wanted the group to disband. Joy wondered what she could do to help the women succeed in a livelihood project.

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<sup>1</sup> Livelihood projects are projects designed to provide people with a way to earn a living. See Exhibit 1 for an example of food production livelihood project products.

## About the Maria's Sisters Women's Organization

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Maria's Sisters is a women's organization that operates in the Velez district on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. It is part of a larger women's association, the Sentosa Women's League, which oversees all other women's groups in the City of Sentosa. Maria's Sisters carries the mission of its mother organization, which is to encourage the active involvement of women in livelihood and social projects.

Maria's Sisters had a membership of 40 women, smaller than most other women's groups in the city. It had a set of six officers consisting of the president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and two information officers. Most of its members were stay-at-home mothers with a high school education. Only a few of its members were employed outside the home and these women tended to be inactive members. Out of the total membership base, approximately 30% were active, meaning they were regular participants in meetings and activities.

Founded in 2014, Maria's Sisters was not effective in meeting its goals and tasks were accomplished at a snail's pace. Although the organization regularly participated in the social activities of Sentosa — such as the International Women's Day rally, outreach to rape and domestic abuse victims, and skill trainings for former sex workers — Maria's Sisters struggled with identifying and running a sustainable livelihood program. Meetings were periodically called for discussion on business ventures, but very few members actually attended the meetings. Joy couldn't help but feel frustrated that the women were not taking livelihood opportunities seriously.

## Identifying a Livelihood Project

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In mid-2015, Joy began to study the livelihood projects of other women's groups with the aim of replicating their success. She discovered that although the entrepreneurial endeavors varied, the most successful ones were involved in handicrafts, food production, and tailoring services.

However, due to a lack of skills and resources, it would be rather difficult for the women of Maria's Sisters to engage in any of these livelihood programs. "I will need to conduct several trainings, request funding to build shops, and acquire equipment to build up. This a huge risk to take, and I am not sure the members of Maria's Sisters would be interested," Joy thought. She decided that a small-scale retailing business would best fit the needs and profile of Maria's Sisters. Such a venture would not require production, storage space, technology, or complicated accounting procedures. It also would be a venture suited to the women's lifestyles and educational backgrounds.

That is when Joy decided to accept assistance from a local politician who offered sacks of rice so the women could engage in a rice retail business. Congressman Relucio Morino was known to provide aid in the form of cash or goods to citizens, but mostly to help alleviate poverty or assist populations after natural disasters, not to kick-start livelihood projects. He told Joy he could assist her with fifteen 25-kilogram sacks of rice, after which the organization would use the money earned to buy its rice. Joy agreed and accepted the offer.

The rice retail business of Maria's Sisters was officially launched on November 16, 2015 at the district hall with a small ceremony that included its members and Congressman Morino. The congressman spoke to the women and let them know that he would be donating 375 kilograms of rice as assistance. The crowd cheered. Joy then thanked him and proceeded to briefly explain the system for distributing rice. She announced that in order for each woman to get an equal chance, the 375 kilograms of rice

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would be evenly distributed among the 40 members. Once they received their share, they would start selling it based on the prevailing market price and then remit a portion of their revenue to the treasurer. The treasurer would collect the money and then purchase more rice sacks to distribute to the women. This cycle was to be repeated every two months.

But when two months had passed, the treasurer had not received any money from the organization's members. This puzzled Joy, who called a meeting to find out what happened.

As it turned out, the women did not have any revenue to send. In fact, instead of selling the rice, approximately 80% of them had cooked and eaten it, while the remaining 20% were struggling to sell it. Dumbfounded, Joy asked them why.

A number of the women said they thought the rice was a donation from Congressman Morino, not assistance for a livelihood project. They heard that Morino had been donating rice sacks and canned goods in nearby districts as part of his election campaign and they thought the rice they received was their share. "Didn't he say this was a donation in his speech?" "Oh this was supposed to be a business?" "We couldn't hear what Joy was saying during the ceremony, it was not clear what was to be done with the rice" were the replies of the women. The rest said that they could not find anyone to sell the rice to because almost all women in their district had their own shares. This meant that they had to sell to other districts.

Disappointed, Joy adjourned the meeting but requested the officers stay.

"What are we going to do? This was our chance to start a livelihood project for the organization and now it's all gone," Joy said to them.

"Maybe it was a miscommunication. We hadn't done enough to prepare them for this," said Luz, the vice president.

"But it was made clear to them at the ceremony," Joy replied.

"They probably got the wrong idea because of Morino," Victoria, the treasurer, explained. "Morino does not assist livelihood projects. He is known as the donations guy, the politician you go to when you need cash assistance or food. This is the first livelihood project we've ever heard he has supported."

"So what are we going to do now?" inquired Joy.

The women discussed the situation for a while and reached the decision that they would continue the project but make certain that the instructions were clear. They would have to seek assistance from Sentosa Women's League to supply them with rice sacks.

Joy spoke to Reinalyn Villar, the president of Sentosa Women's League.

"Are you sure you can get this project going, Joy, especially after what happened?" asked Reinalyn.

"It's worth trying. It was a case of miscommunication, so we're going to make sure this time that they understand what the rice is for," Joy said.

Reinalyn agreed after Joy reassured her. However, she warned that she could only supply Joy with 10 rice sacks as this was the maximum amount they could provide given the number of other women's organizations Sentosa Women's League was assisting.

The ten 25-kilogram rice sacks arrived on February 6, 2016 and were delivered to the district hall where the women of Maria's Sisters gathered for their monthly meeting. Joy took charge and carefully

explained in detail the system she introduced back in November. This time she announced that there will be a monthly check on how much rice was sold.

"This is too little! Each member will get around 6 kilograms of rice; it's not enough to start a business," said Lovette, an outspoken member of Maria's Sisters. The other women nodded in agreement and the murmurs began.

"What do you mean? This is the most we can request from Sentosa. They will not give more than that. We ought to start small and, if all goes well, eventually we'll grow and be able to supply more rice to each member. What is essential is that the members transfer the revenue to the treasurer to keep the business running," Joy replied.

"But how can we sell a meager 6 kilograms of rice? It's too much effort for such a small amount. Can't they just increase it?" another member voiced her sentiments.

"That's not possible for now; maybe in the future but definitely not now. We have to at least prove that we can run the rice retail business first," Joy responded.

"I'm not sure rice retail is the right livelihood project for us. Why can't we do something else, like handicrafts or even food production? That's something fun for us," said Mila, one of the new members.

"But this is the easiest project and rice is always in demand. Cooking will require a lot of work and the equipment would be costly," Victoria answered her.

"But 6 kilograms of rice is too little! It's not worth the effort," several women said.

After a few minutes of heated arguing and raised voices, Lovette stood up again. "I suggest that Maria's Sisters splits into two. Then, each group will be able to request separate assistance. There will be more rice for everybody," she suggested.

"Well if that's the case, then we would like to separate as well. The four of us would like to start a bakery instead," said Sharon, referring to three other women members. Soon the women in the hall started chattering louder as the idea of splitting appealed to them.

Joy stood in front of the members, not knowing what to do. She did not expect this to happen. Subdividing the group would only diminish the power of Maria's Sisters and prevent it from growing, she thought.

## Which Way to Go?

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As Joy sat in her small office, she weighed the options. It was evident that the rice retail business could not move forward without addressing the women's issues. She was torn between splitting the group into three, changing the livelihood project, or attempting to increase the number of rice sacks. Any one of these three options could cause a faction in the group.

Joy wondered what she could do to save Maria's Sisters and still cater to the needs of the women.

**Exhibit 1**

Example products of a food production livelihood project: Filipino delicacies



Source: <http://www.metrokelan.com/oc-content/uploads/126/13325.jpg>