

**COMMENTS IN MEMORIAM FOR OBET VERZOLA** – Norman Uphoff, Cornell University  
May 15, 2020

I am sure that wherever the report of our friend and colleague Obet Verzola's passing reached, there was shock and sadness and a feeling of irreplaceable loss. We here at the SRI-Rice center in Ithaca, New York, were stunned and staggered by this news. Obet was a dear friend and a greatly respected colleague, someone whose brilliance and generosity shone around him and lighted up the lives of all who were fortunate enough to know him and to interact with him.

I knew Obet mostly from half a dozen visits to the Philippines to work on our mutual interest in the System of Rice Intensification, when he organized my visits with the deft hand of an impresario and was a wonderful traveling companion. He had contacts across the whole institutional spectrum of the country.

Obet took me to NGOs and universities, to numerous government agencies, to PhilRice and IRRI, to religious organizations, to farmer groups and community associations. To use a figure of speech from his original discipline of electrical engineering, Obet was 'plugged in' everywhere. While some consider him as 'the father of email' in the Philippines, to me he seemed like the embodiment of civil society in the country. I thought of him as 'Mr. Civil Society.'

One quality always stood out. While Obet was passionate in his pursuit of justice for people anywhere and everywhere, he was himself consistently judicious and fair-minded in approaching people or issues or assessments. He was living proof that we need not choose between being detached and engaged. Obet, on one hand, was dispassionate and objective, while being actively engaged, both emotionally and intellectually. Put another way, Obet was objective and very rational with regard to means and strategy, and untiringly committed to achieving ends, goals and objectives, not for himself so much as for others.

Another quality that struck those who knew him was his gentleness. He had such a concerned and caring attitude toward others. But at the same time, he had a remarkable tenacity, a spine of steel, that was most admirable. This bravery and his commitment to others' welfare, at the expense of his own well-being, was manifested in his hunger strike against the Philippine government's hasty attempt to approve genetically-modified maize for use, and in his surviving the rigors and the horrors of imprisonment for three years during Ferdinand Marcos' Martial Law.

My wife and I remember with great fondness the visit that Obet and Flor made to Cornell University over 10 years ago, en route to a conference in San Diego, California. It was a really great pleasure to have their company here in Ithaca, New York, bringing two opposite sides of the globe together. Obet and Flor could easily be at home anywhere in the world, taking life as it came.

Not only will people in the Philippines mourn the loss of Obet, and especially those Filipinos who participate actively in its civil society. There is now an international community of persons who are working with and for the agroecological innovation of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), who will miss him greatly. This community spans now more than 60 countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East,

Europe, and Latin America. Obet was one of the first to join and expand this community, which has extended SRI ideas to benefit over 20 million farmers around the world.

Obet's typical generosity meant that he passed up the opportunity to participate in the first (and so far only) meeting of the SRI global community, convened in China in 2002. He thought that the Philippine should be represented by someone who was on the front-lines of testing and spreading SRI, so he declined my invitation in favor of Robby Gasparillo from BIND, also a good conference participant. Obet was always thinking about how to build up and spread individual and collective capacities to make this a better world.

We hope that the effort and love and foresightful thought that Obet put into SRI-Pilipinas and so many other channels for collective action in the Philippines will now be magnified by those whose lives he touched with warmth and inspiration and realistic optimism. Few will ever match his brilliance and generosity, but we can aspire to keep and spread his gentleness and tenacity, his passion and his fair-mindedness. This was a life well-lived and an inspiration to us all.