

# POLICY BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2020



## Evaluation of the ATI's Learning Site Program in Luzon and Visayas

*The Learning Site Program has charted the path towards the attainment of ideal farming communities. How each learning site will fare in the future, how each will be able to achieve its goals, how each one will deal with the challenges ahead; their success or failure would also mean the same for the ATI.*

### Executive Summary

This study reports the results of the conduct of the Impact Evaluation of the Establishment of Learning Sites Program in Luzon and Visayas focusing on the design, implementation, and results of the program. The findings of the study suggest the positive performance of the program based on the feedback from learning site (LS) cooperators in terms of the attainment of the program's intended purpose and its relevance to the community.

There were actions identified that need to be taken to improve the implementation of the program. This includes reviewing the program documents and guidelines used, the selection criteria and the minimum requirements, the reach and coverage of the program, the step-by-step procedure of certification process, the establishment of a defined M&E system, and the harmonization of definitions and terms. Further, the program's connection/relationship to TESDA's Farm School Accreditation and DOT's Farm Tourism Site Accreditation needs to well-defined and properly coordinated among relevant stakeholders.

Nonetheless, the financial and technical assistance provided by the ATI through the program was claimed to be helpful as it contributed to the improvement not only in the LS cooperators' socio-economic status and well-being but also in their role of being able to share the knowledge and skills gained to others in their respective communities.

### Introduction

The Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) began to implement the Learning Site program in 2011 as a support to the National Organic Agriculture Program of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and other ATI programs and services. It encouraged qualified farm owners and farmer cooperators to be certified by ATI to become a model farm where farmers, agriculture enthusiasts, students, visitors, and other individuals interested in farming can learn how agriculture can be a viable enterprise by adopting good and appropriate farming practices and strategies.

Since its implementation to August 2019, there have been about 861 LS and 65 Schools for Practical Agriculture (SPAs) established. Numerous articles and anecdotes of success stories have been published detailing the positive benefits and results of the program. However, there hasn't been any research or study made to comprehensively evaluate the program. Thus, the ATI commissioned the conduct of the study to assess whether intended changes attributed to the program, as well as unintended changes, were achieved.

# Approach and Methodology

The study used a mixed-method research process combining qualitative and quantitative perspective in dealing with the way data and information are obtained and analyzed. Data collection methods used included survey questionnaires (SQs), key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), direct observation of the LS visited, and review of documents.

The LS cooperator respondents were selected using a sampling framework that derives a proportionate number of LS in each region. There were 50 and 22 LS cooperators interviewed for Luzon and Visayas, respectively. A number of ATI personnel from the Central Office and Regional Training Centers were also interviewed to supplement the information gathered from the LS cooperators. Further, documents and materials, such as policy, guidelines, standard operating procedures, and monitoring reports relevant to the program, were reviewed.

The data and information gathered were analyzed and corroborated in order to provide evidence and judgment on the performance of the LS program. Specifically, the areas looked into were the program design and concept, the implementation and management of the program, and the program impact.

## Key Findings

### A Program Design and Concept

- There is a need to revise the program documents and guidelines to include the step-by-step procedure from the selection of cooperators until their approved certification and an explicit description that states the responsibility of the implementers, the financing needs of the program, the implementation arrangements, and the timeline and duration of the LS certification.
- The growing popularity of the program has caught the attention of some politicians which affected the program design. There were issues raised over the ownership of the program in which the ATI has secured the intellectual property rights over it.

- The definitions and terms being used need to be harmonized as differences in the understanding and interpretation of words such as “accreditation”, “certification”, “adoption of technologies”, and “AF technologies”, among others, were observed.
- LS cooperators mentioned their intended functions which are to be considered as a segment/branch of the ATI in extending to local communities the latest AF technologies by practicing the principle of “teaching by example”.

### B Implementation and Management

- The trainings received from ATI was the main factor that influenced farm owners/cooperators to apply to become certified LS. The initial participants were limited to those who had previously been engaged in ATI interventions. There was also some concern over the lack of involvement of indigenous people and youth which suggested the need to change the selection criteria.
- There were issues regarding the reach and coverage of the program wherein logistics for secluded areas was difficult. This led to the constraints in having more individuals to be involved in the program and the difficulty in validating applicants and monitoring already certified LS.
- There was also a concern over the standards, processes, and requirements linked with the LS program such as the TESDA’s Farm School accreditation and DOT’s Farm Tourism accreditation. The connection between these programs needs to be properly identified and included in any LS program documents, guidelines, and materials. The LS cooperator requested that the ATI provide assistance for them to be accredited in these other programs as well.
- The LS cooperators had positive claims on the financial and technical support given. However, to further elevate their LS into SPAs or farm tourism sites, the LS cooperators acknowledged the need for additional resources to develop their farms. It was suggested that the ATI can help assist the LS cooperators to identify where possible funding can be obtained.







- There is also no defined M&E system and feedback mechanism for the program, except for the mere conduct of site validations, compliance checking of requirements, and submission of reports for fund liquidation. There is no evidence that monitoring is done during the post-certification phase which seeks to see whether LS cooperators maintain the prescribed requirements and criteria of being a certified LS and that desired results of the program are being seen in them.

## **C** Program Impact

- The “Big Brother, Small Brother” concept was apparent as LS cooperators were able to share their knowledge and skills gained to other farmers in their communities and help them market their produce. One opportunity suggested was to identify strategies that will complement the big brother and small brother within the community.
- LS cooperators claimed positive changes in their socio-economic well-being. This is because the LS were able to be engaged in the farming and marketing of produce, involved in the conduct of capacity building activities, and cater to the general public and tourists visiting their farms. However, it was noticed that some LS focus more on their pursuit of being a model farm and tourism destination rather than their farm production.
- LS cooperators were noted to become self-sufficient that even without additional ATI support, their farm activities would be sustained, albeit challenging. The LS cooperators' engagement in value-adding processes also helps the sustainability of their farming enterprises. Nonetheless, the ATI was mentioned as an important partner that enables them to connect to multiple clients and other stakeholders from the government, private, academe and foreign sectors.
- The LS program also helped the farm cooperators developed their skills in report writing, farm monitoring activities, and public speaking. Being tapped as resource persons, LS cooperators become confident in giving speeches and lectures in which some were able to participate in national and international events and others receive awards and/or recognition.

- There is an absence of organized data and information regarding the learning site's operation. Most LS cooperators were observed to be not keen on keeping records. The inability of LS cooperators to answer queries regarding the number of clients being served or that visits their learning site and their volume of production was apparent. This aspect could be looked into by the ATI in order to further help not only the LS cooperators but other farmer clients as well.

## Recommendations

**01** There is a need to improve the organization of information regarding the LS program in aid of better policy and decision-making. Moreso, trainings and capacity building on data management and record-keeping should be provided to LS cooperators. This would help ease the data collection process and information management for ATI as it can be ensured that there is available LS-related information from the LS cooperators.

**02** There is a need to further strengthen the partnership and coordination between the ATI and other agencies such as the TESDA and DOT. Having similar or related programs, incidents of irregularity of processes and criteria used should be avoided. The relationship between the programs needs to be clear to avoid confusion and difficulty to prospective individuals who want to participate in any of the programs.

**03** The continuous improvement of the program should be done through the review and refinement of standards and processes involved such as the selection criteria and requirements, the reach and area coverage of the program, the step-by-step procedure of certification process and its ideal timeframe, a defined M&E system, and the understanding of definitions and terms used.

**04** The concept of “Big Brother, Small Brother” needs to be looked into deeper as a mechanism to further help and improve the farmers’ status and conditions in communities wherein there are identified LS cooperators. Further assistance and support can be further provided to maximize/utilize the certified LS as a segment of the ATI in achieving the goals of the AF sector. This includes the provision of information on where possible funding or capital can be obtained to further improve the learning sites’ infrastructure and operations.



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