

## LOKAL LAB / MAYTHEMAGAZINE

*A walk through the Tropical Academy with Mark Pintucan, co-founder of Lokal Lab. Among regenerative plots and seed-saving systems, we spoke about the immediate consequences of gentrification, how land shifts, how communities adapt, and why responsibility belongs to both those who live here and those who arrive. Between compost, herbs, and woven fibers, it became clear that sustainable food systems are not abstract solutions, but lived practices.*

### 1. Naming the Ground

**- How did your own relationship with Siargao shape the values behind Lokal Lab?**

We're four founders. One, Ate Analyn, is from the island. She's the one who started a little bit of everything. I'm from Switzerland and from the north of the Philippines. My partner Iris is from Surigao del Sur, so one state down south. And then the last founder, Ate Kara, is from Manila.

*So what made us come together were the shared values that we have. The local is really the core; we wanted to be able to co-create the solutions together. So nothing comes fully from us. We do surveys, information campaigns, and discussion groups, focusing on finding solutions together.*

**- Was there a moment when you felt this needed to exist?**

The reason we developed this NGO is mainly that people started describing Siargao as the next Bali, and we got really scared of that kind of description. And for us, we feel that *Siargao is Siargao. It's not Bali, it's not Boracay, Siargao is Siargao. And the reason it is Siargao*

*is because of the people living here, the nature, and its geographic location from the Ring of Fire. And yeah, we have all the Pacific Ocean coming here.*

We have so many people coming here from around the world. So, having that said, *we wanted to be able to provide a tool to protect as much as possible, what is happening here. When I say protect, I don't want to put us as the savior of whatever is going to happen.*

It's more about *having a platform to be able to show something different.* We didn't want to continue business as usual, where people come, and they have a business. Oh, I'm going to open a resort with an infinity pool, have a high-end kitchen, and have digital nomads and parties. That's something that is business as normal.

What we wanted is that we're living in the 21st century, and by now *everybody should know about climate change, about pollution, gentrification, and exploitation.* So if we know all these problems, we can finally focus more on the solutions.

So this is where Localab comes in.

### 2. An Island in Motion

**- Was it more like a learning by doing process for you, or do you have a sustainable background, like business strategies or development aid?**

I'm a designer architect, so it's like that's how I do things. It's like you do a prototype, you test it, and it breaks. You learn from it, and you do another one. You test it with people. They give your feedback. So it's the same. And here, when we do concept, it's just like we sit down

together, we talk about the challenges and find solutions together. And then that's where the local community comes in.

We started all of this with the *leading problem of gentrification*. People can no longer afford to buy or even live on the island. And once that happens, it becomes a problem for everything else, where ingredients come from, who is able to work here, and how high the cost of living becomes.

So it narrowed down really fast to one of the first elements that we need to be working on is the source of food, because the source of food can solve multiple things, like basic nature, basic livelihoods of the community.

What we're seeing right now is that many people want to work in the tourism industry because that's where the money is. But they often don't have the network to actually enter that industry. At the same time, farming becomes more and more complicated, landowners buy up land, and farmers end up losing access to it, becoming employees within that system rather than independent producers. *We realized that if we train farmers to respond to future demand, especially the need for their local source, businesses wouldn't need to buy land themselves. Instead, they could support local farmers directly. That felt like a big shift.*

So we focused on helping farmers connect with the market. *But for this to work, it has to be done through nature-based solutions. Why? Because if we were to build a fully self-sufficient island system through conventional farming, agriculture would end up using around 80% of the land. Nature-based approaches open up a different possibility. They allow space for wildlife instead of monocultures, while also enabling the community to grow food without pesticides.* That creates better health outcomes and supports a more holistic system overall.

### **- Do you think visitors are aware of their impact?**

That's a very challenging question because we're not going to be able to shape tourism. We're trying to establish what Siargao is.

So if you come to Siargao, you come to Siargao for Siargao. If you come to Siargao for Bali, you're not going to find what you're looking for. So we're really shaping it in a way where basically the demand will not influence the offer. It's more the offer that will influence what is coming. And that's what we really try to do. So shaping, like highlighting the identity of the island, highlighting what is coming from the island, and highlighting what is not from the island.

So at a certain point, we're developing a guide on the island. So that people clearly know that we don't grow coffee on the island, it's all exported, but you have herbal teas instead. So it's always about *introducing local alternatives to highlight that your urban behavior might not fit what the island has here.*

It's just transitioning that mindset to like when you're a traveler, you're also expecting things that you might not have and be open to new things.

### 3. *The Mission of Rethinking*

- **Do you see Lokal Lab as something that could exist elsewhere, perhaps other islands in the Philippines?**

We have echoes that, yes, we are a very good role model. But right now, we're still far from the completion of the project. We're a non-profit, so it's difficult to battle for profits mindset. And at the end, we just want like, we know that we're very optimistic that Local Lab will be winning this battle because there is a shift in the mindset of the tourism industry. Visitors are changing. They want something different when they come to Siargao. Like they're seeing more and more that basically everything is the same. You come here, it's the same in Boracay. It's the same in Palawan. What makes Siargao a little bit different is what we're building towards. We're creating a playbook of how Local Lab operates so that other islands can replicate the same system. We do not want us to go there and do the same. *It's more about spreading the knowledge rather than expanding to different hubs among the islands. Showing that it's possible and leaving room for their own interpretation. If they need us, we can come in. But we don't want to just replicate what we did here.*

- **You often speak about moving away from linear systems toward circular ones. What does that shift look like in everyday practice at Lokal Lab?**

Tropical Academy is our tool to teach nature-based solutions. We have two classrooms and the auditorium in the middle of our demonstration farm. The best way to teach is to show systems that work. So we have a seed saving farm, where we transition from F1 seeds to open-pollinated seeds, and then we have regenerative systems that are all around for the farmers to see, because they're brainwashed by the government into

monocrops. Monocrops mean everything is clean for them; there are no herbs, there is no soil, and just the final product.

For many farmers, a 'clean' farm means removing everything that looks messy. *What we try to show is that this isn't a mess, it's nature.* And once people start seeing that, they begin applying it in their own farms, and that's the way to be part of the network to be able to sell to businesses.

And every month they meet here where they have their gatherings, where they talk about their challenges, the prices, and the environment that is following, like their architecture that they know of, and right now what is happening is the government is seeing the advantage of the structure.

So they do the trainings here, they do their general meetings here because the only structure that they have is air-con buildings that are brick closed, and they don't see nature, and here, people sit surrounded by nature, with wind instead of walls. That changes how conversations happen, and people respond to that.

So we not only train farmers, but we also train builders on the island. After Typhoon Odette, 80% of the structures were destroyed, and it became clear that we also needed to train builders to rethink materials, construction, and how we build with nature rather than against it. Builders are trying to save money on mixtures of concrete or as carpentry assembly, so, like being here, they'll be able to witness regenerative architecture, also promoting the use of nipah instead of

undulated sheets for insulation, for like river cleaning, etc. And then with the last training that we'll be hosting here is hospitality. So the whole tourism industry is training the businesses to reduce their waste using local ingredients and share local culture.

After the typhoon, we got a lot of donations, and we divided it in three so the short-term relief was for immediate food and construction, the medium-term relief was helping farmers develop their farms for food sustainability, and then the long-term is this structure.

**- How does nature-oriented education reshape the way people relate to land, resources, and their identity?**

What we're observing is that people become more comfortable in what they're doing. When they feel supported, when they know we have their backs, they're more open about their challenges and more confident in addressing them.

On the farm side, we organize monthly gatherings where farmers come together to discuss pricing, crop issues, or setbacks. If one farmer faces a problem, the others step in to help. Over time, this has become something that exists beyond Lokal Lab. We created the group dynamic, but they've developed their own governance. The system is now self-supporting, with farmers sharing advice based on their own knowledge and experience, without external influence.

That's where the real shift happens. It's not just about farming techniques. It's about rebuilding trust in their own expertise and reconnecting with what already belongs to them. Nature-based education becomes less about instruction and more about rediscovering confidence in the land and in themselves.

#### ***4. Learning as Practice***

**- Do you also work with younger generations, encouraging them to see farming as a possibility rather than something to leave behind?**

Yes, definitely.

We work with older teenagers, so in senior high school. The intention there is that younger ones are still very influenced by their parents' behavior and the school model, and in teenagers, *we see the opportunity to feed that rebellious intention, and we see in food systems the opportunity for being independent.* So for that, we do work with surrounding high schools where there's on-job trainings.

We have 40 students for the next 10 more days coming here every day to help on the farm and be exposed to nature-based farming solutions, and then we do part, we have a partnership agreement with the Surigao del Norte State University, where they send their students also to be learning more about nature-based agriculture.

**- Would you describe nature-based farming as a form of rebellion, especially for younger generations?**

I wouldn't call it rebellion. It's more about the opportunity for independence. Traditionally, many young people don't aspire to become farmers. It's often seen as something you leave behind. But when they see what's happening here, they begin to view it differently. They see that farming can be innovative, collaborative, and economically viable.

We've had young farmers share their experiences with us, and they're genuinely excited. Some have increased their income by up to 400 percent within the network. Others have been able to buy plane tickets, travel around the Philippines, or invest back into their farms. When farming becomes a pathway to mobility and autonomy, it stops being something you escape and starts becoming something you choose.

- **Language-wise, do you encourage the work more in English, or does it remain rooted in the local language?**

It depends on the context. Name-wise, the plants and everything are in English. Just to ease the contact with the business side and have the standard. But there are native plants that have their native names. For the community liaison, you have to speak the local language. If you're a project manager who works with the community, you have to speak the local language.

If you're working in the communications department, you need to understand the local language. We have different tiers where the local language is really needed.

## ***5. What Stays With You***

- **As a non-profit organization, do you face financial limitations in pursuing your vision?**

Of course. It's difficult. We're currently reaching the end of the typhoon-related donations, so we're accelerating our efforts to make each department more independent.

The NGO is structured into four main areas: community building, which supports farmer, artisan, and youth networks; the Tropical Academy, a social enterprise that connects farmers with businesses and the tourism sector; and Sustainable Futures, which acts as an advocacy and think tank for regenerative development.

The Academy and the social enterprise are designed to generate profit, and ideally, that profit is reinvested into the NGO. But last year, tourism slowed down, and instead of supporting the NGO, the social enterprise had to be supported by it. That's not the ideal balance.

I still believe the model can work. One of our biggest challenges right now is visibility. Visitors don't always know what's happening here, and I believe they want to. We used to say: 'Travels with purpose.' That's the kind of tourism we're building toward.

**- What keeps you going on difficult days, especially during moments of disruption, such as typhoons?**

Typhoons test everything. After Odette, 80% of the structures on the island were destroyed. *It forced us to rethink not only how we farm, but how we build. That's when we started training builders as well, encouraging regenerative architecture and materials that work with nature rather than against it.*

When the typhoon donations came in, we divided them into three phases: immediate relief for food and reconstruction, mid-term support for farmers to restore their livelihoods, and long-term investment into infrastructure like the Tropical Academy.

Difficult moments remind us why the system matters. When a community has networks, shared knowledge, and regenerative practices in place, recovery becomes collective rather than individual. That's what keeps us going, seeing that resilience can be built, not just hoped for.

**- What are the most pressing challenges Lokal Lab faces today, internally and externally?**

Our challenge is that people don't segregate properly. Currently, we're studying the reason why the community is not segregating properly. *Is it a lack of knowledge, is it a lack of desire, or do they don't know what happens with the waste, or is it that they think that it all ends up in the same place?* We're studying that to be able to have a tailored communication campaign to teach and proof them the advantages.

For example, it doesn't smell bad! This is an advocacy for us, like people have always a bad reputation, compost has a really bad

reputation with people, and we're like, come visit our compost, you'll see it doesn't smell bad, you can have your business that has compost inside.

Financially, being a non-profit also means constantly balancing ideals with economic realities. Tourism fluctuates. Funding ends. We have to ensure that our regenerative systems can sustain themselves long term.

**- Where do you see the most meaningful change emerging through Lokal Lab's work?**

*The most meaningful change becomes visible in people.*

We host cooking classes to share recipes developed here. One of our original farmers, Junjun, created a vegan sisig using banana heart, and now he teaches it himself. What began as an experiment became something he owns and passes on.

When we first met Ate Viki, the weaving master of the island, she was very shy and barely spoke. Since then, she has taught around 400 students, bought her own tuk-tuk, built her own farm, and created a growing network of weavers she now trains herself.

At the same time, change is visible in the land. We have around 8,000 square meters of demonstration farm where we grow 63 different varieties, from eggplants to arugula to medicinal herbs. There are no monocrops. Each plot combines plants that complement each other. The soil is fed by compost. Trees act as buffers against surrounding pesticides. Nutrients are reinjected into the system rather than extracted from it.

With support from the German embassy, we are developing a post-harvest facility to extend the shelf life of local produce, including a production kitchen and storage infrastructure. Every Monday and Friday, farm teams harvest together, weigh their crops, and see the system functioning in real time.

For us, meaningful change happens when regeneration becomes visible in confidence, in local income, and in the land maintenance itself.

## ***6. Looking Forward, Gently***

### **- What are the next ecological phases you're working toward?**

We have a local little source of water all the way at the end of the farm, which is a micro-protected mini area that we're using as a demonstration protection area. This water source goes into a sort of mandala farm that we're trying to demonstrate, where it's inspired by the Mexican method of farming. Before it became Mexico, it was a marshland, and it was kind of floating plots, and we're trying to replicate that there. It's a very difficult process. The next phase is the rice field to regenerate because it's been overexploited for the previous years, and it's been four years since we didn't do anything, and the next phase is starting to utilize the rice field.

### **- What is the future of the local lab? What is the big wish?**

*The ideal future is that Lokal Lab disappears because there's no longer a need for it.* Basically, everything we did is turned over to the community. What would remain would be the tropical academy as a vocational school. Maybe this could be spread outside of Siargao. Maybe even outside of the Philippines. The design of it is really, the angle is tropical knowledge. We live in a world where everything is dictated by a four-season mindset. We believe that there are more people living in a two-season mindset. I feel like people living in a two-season mindset are more generous, more empathic, and working with nature, while in the four-season mindset, you believe you can control nature and nature will work with you. In the two seasons, you have to take care of nature because it will erase everything if you don't work.