Challenges for Small Farmers
The rugged and narrow road leading to the farm of 55-year old Henelito D. Idagan – “Heny” to his peers – seemingly depicts life as a farmer in rural Mindanao, Philippines – rough and yet hardy and resilient. Having planted an assortment of crops over the years in his farm located in the municipality of Impasug-ong in the province of Bukidnon, he had been through all the hardships that a farmer could experience – low yields due to changing weather conditions, high prices of fertilizers and insecticides, lack of credit, lack of scale, and poor access to markets.

Heny gleaned such an opportunity from a one-year pilot project entitled “Bridging Farmers to the Jollibee Supply Chain”, a collaborative venture started in 2008 between the Jollibee Foundation (JF), the National Livelihood Development Corporation (NLDC), and CRS. With Impasug-ong as one of the selected project sites, Heny and his fellow farmers’ realized that their dream of accessing a large formal market such as Jollibee Foods Corporation (JFC) – the Philippines’ leading fast food chain – slowly became a reality. Formal markets require high quality produce, but offer much higher prices than the middlemen who dominate local markets.

Strength in Numbers
For Heny, the agroenterprise clustering approach employed by CRS succeeded in organizing small farmers into groups for marketing to JFC. Chosen as the leader for the Intavas cluster for his leadership and good farming practices, Heny recounted how they were able to test market red onions to JFC in 2009 with a price and quantity agreed before harvest. His successful delivery of 200 kilos of red onions to JFC encouraged him to grow his onion farming.

In times when Heny sees that the delivery requirement could not be met, the cluster provides a safety net for the members. “The advantage of these groups is that if there are members who are failing to produce I can help them, and they can also help me. If a member fails to meet the delivery requirement, others step-up to assist.”

“Because we can consolidate our crops, we can provide a larger volume to Jollibee. Also, I no longer worry because there is already a ready market.”

Yields improved when appropriate farming technologies were applied. One such technology was the use of rain shelters, a protective cropping system, where onion plants are grown under a structure made of bamboo with a plastic sheet roof. “Onions are extremely susceptible to rainfall, thus the rain shelters protect the onions from becoming too soggy and mushy,” explained Heny. He was able to use the rain shelter to collect rainwater runoff from the roof in a water catchment, known as a sump. This now serves to irrigate the plants and to grow fish for the family’s consumption and additional income.

Looking ahead, Heny is positive that an expanded project (Phase 2) targeting 3,000 farmers in 15 municipalities and 6 provinces will continue in taking advantage of the JFC market access to sustain the gains achieved from the pilot project. The journey has not yet ended. The road is still long, but Heny remains optimistic that the project will widen the road towards advancement for Impasug-ong’s onion farmers.

This project is supported by the Jollibee Foundation, the National Livelihood Development Corporation (NLDC), the Local Government Units, and CRS.