

Interview with Camille Rose D. Albarracin, Founder and Chief Greenovator, Everything Green Trading & Consulting, the Philippines

Philippine Woman Entrepreneur Turns Waste Into Everything Green

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The United States hosted APEC in 2023 in Seattle where there were many informal dialogues among business people, entrepreneurs, scholars, and politicians, in addition to official discussions among the delegations. “Women in Trade” was one of those businesses participating, highlighting how talented women are contributing significantly to the development of international trade.

Camille Rose Albarracin, a Philippine entrepreneur and founder of Everything Green, a company pursuing green growth by helping the producers of daily-use products to transform waste into goods, took part in these dialogues. The following interview with her gives some insights into the nature and characteristics of entrepreneurship in the APEC region.

(Interviewed on Oct. 26, 2023)

The Founding of “Everything Green”

JS: Your company “Everything Green” is working on the transformation of waste into high-quality, locally-made artisanal products. Could you explain how you came to found this company?

Albarracin: First of all, thank you so much for the invitation. I’m Camille, the founder and chief innovator but I call myself the chief greenovator. I founded Everything Green after working in the hospitality industry and tourism industry for more than 15 years, during which time I came to realize the incredible amount of waste generated by the hospitality industry and its guests.

I felt this heavy burden seeing the amount of waste that we generate – one guest can generate one kilo of waste per room per night, and if you consider that there are so many tourists in all these hotels, imagine how much waste is generated just for a one-night stay. So this made me feel that I wanted to be part of the solution, and to come up with sustainable and green alternative solutions for the waste that we generate. Just to give you an insight, the hotel slippers that you typically see in hotels are usually made of polyester material which is basically plastic. We wanted to find a replacement or a greener alternative for that. This led to our flagship brand, which is a brand of slippers for the hotel industry.

The people behind the company are the artists and the local communities that we work with. For instance, we work with



Camille Rose D. Albarracin

indigenous communities which have access to agricultural waste. Then they transform it and process it and we also compensate them for the value of the work that they do. Instead of using it just for fertilizer, they are able to provide themselves with a sustainable livelihood. We also work with several communities including people with disabilities or deaf communities, as well as artisans displaced from other areas.

So basically, we are a social enterprise that works with various communities that process waste and turn it into functional and artisanal products that we bring to big companies and corporations. We bridge that gap as a mediator from the farmers and indigenous people to the big companies and big corporations, providing them with market

access at the same time.

JS: Are your products also exported overseas?

Albarracin: Some will be exported and we already have some small batch orders. We are more of a business to business, and in the domestic market we cater to big hotels. We are now cultivating our export markets, including Japan, and have already received several inquiries from hotels and trades in Japan and Singapore, as well as the US, the United Kingdom and even Dubai.

JS: This sounds like a very interesting business. You are not just a producer but also a service company, so it must require some brains as well. Is securing

funding a difficult aspect of the business?

Albarracin: We are working with a total of 18 local partner communities, using agricultural waste from materials such as coconuts. Aside from these agricultural and artisanal partners, we also have an in-house scientist who conducts impact studies, a forest economist, a designer and an innovation catalyst.

Actually since the pandemic happened, we have tried to raise funds with the help of government institutions. The Philippines has just passed an Innovative Startup Act which fosters or helps micro and small businesses, to enable them to be funded and supported through research innovation and development. It has been challenging because there are so many start-ups in the Philippines right now. We have also applied for a grant from the Department of Science and Technology called “women helping women” which is available to start-ups. However, it does take time to receive government funding and we have to prove that we deserve the grant. We also need other sources of capital in addition to these start-up grants. The other day we received an order for 500,000 pairs of slippers and our capacity is very low at this time, so we need more financial access for capitalization and more investors.

I do believe that in the Philippines it’s really hard to get direct capital, but we have to really provide more resources to present to investors. That is quite a challenge for us. We are starting with small steps but once we gain more traction there will probably be more investors as we grow little by little. But of course it doesn’t happen overnight. We also respect the process as we go through but we are very young, just a five-year-old company, and that includes the pandemic which was very challenging.

JS: Do you think that your company’s mission to protect the global environment is likely to attract many people and give them an incentive to invest?

Albarracin: First of all, in terms of the law and domestic policies, we don’t have any incentives yet for green practitioners or sustainable practitioners and we’re not there yet even for green financing or green accounting. We are in the same playing field as traditional businesses and there is no incentive yet for social innovation or sustainable micro and small businesses, even for start-ups. In terms of global attention, we have started to receive orders from European Union and other countries because if they support sustainable products coming from the Philippines, I believe they will also be getting incentives. So I think on the global scale our market right

now is not really here in the Philippines but rather more global. When it comes to ESGs and green finance, the developed countries are already practicing this but here in the Philippines, for micro and small businesses, we are not there yet.

JS: Your products include goods for daily use, but what other products are you working on?

Albarracin: We produce eco-friendly lifestyle products, such as the hotel slippers. For the home, we create lampshades, vases and desk pads. Typically hotel rooms have lamps, slippers and other amenities, so we provide these kinds of goods, and also for bigger corporations we provide laptop sleeves or eco bags or water tumbler holders which are all useful daily goods. We also have other wearable fashion products and lifestyle products made from sustainable and natural materials.

JS: Could you elaborate a little on what “greenovative” solutions are and how your company is encouraging innovation while contributing to green growth?

Albarracin: So we have a tagline – “less waste, more possibilities” – which is also part of the bio-circularity economy. This means that the waste we gather from farmers and agricultural areas is turned into innovative products that are not usually made from this waste. We also collect textile waste or plastic waste from other companies, and then we turn this into other products that can be used by the same company. For instance, there was one energy company client that produces ash in its power plants, and they asked what we could do with it.

Aside from our products, we also provide consultancy services and aim to support multi-sectoral initiatives by tapping into the education sector. We approached students from senior high schools to participate in a science competition to solve problems. In this way, we don’t approach problem solving alone but with a multi-sectoral and multiple disciplinary approach. We are facilitating innovation by linking companies and students, especially the younger generations who are the genuine innovators these days. So we tap into their talents and come up with new projects, such as coffee sachets for offices. We see renovation as solving the internal problems of a company with regard to their waste. However, it is important to determine who could be the potential beneficiaries, and what kind of communities can partner with which companies. In this respect we

are more like the conduit or the enabler for the project.

JS: Do you need scientists to examine what kind of waste could be transformed into products? Finding the seeds of innovation is presumably very important.

Albarracin: That's correct because we do not rely on our own expertise, but we tap into different kinds of expertise coming from the forestry or the agricultural sectors. Also expertise coming from the impact measurement side and from designers. We also work with creatives who are involved in the design aspects, such as industrial design or materiality, in pursuit of how to combine design, creativity and science. We aim to promote collaboration between different parties by sparking and providing innovation among multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral fields.

Challenges for Green Growth

JS: Do you think green growth can be obtained easily or does it pose a major challenge?

Albarracin: I do believe that it is achievable especially in 2023, as sustainability is not just a buzzword anymore but is really happening. In the Philippines, I don't feel that a transparent definition of green growth has been established. But I think that green growth is achievable if we have a clear intention and transparency in terms of working with other economies and countries. But it has to become intentional. Big corporations can intentionally include micro and small businesses such as ours into their net zero achievement plans for ESGs, for example. Micro and small businesses are very much the backbone of green growth, and we have the agility to adapt. Many of the exciting innovative ideas are coming from small businesses, so if the bigger corporations adopt these then green growth can be achieved. This also links into greater resilience, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

Developing Innovative Human Resources & Entrepreneurship

JS: Turning to entrepreneurship, you must need innovative human resources to do your business. Do you find it very easy to source these people?

Albarracin: I work with young people, including students, as they have great innovative ideas, but we need to harness that and develop those ideas as well. The hardest part is actually the implementing stage. The ideas are there but how to implement them is difficult; how to actually start the idea. So if we focus our efforts on which particular project or which innovation project we can really select and filter, we have enough human resources when it comes to driving innovation. But I think it requires a bit of encouragement because we need to really encourage them to go for innovative products or projects. We need greater support from our domestic government to bring about systemic change.

JEF: So you can rely on a certain amount of government help to cultivate innovative human resources, but how about when it comes to entrepreneurship in general?

Albarracin: From the point of view of the Philippines, upon graduating most people are preoccupied with finding employment. Entrepreneurship is more of a secondary concern, because people believe they have to first put food on the table. So how do we do that? Usually we go for employment first, then after we have raised our own small amount of capital, entrepreneurship comes next. I think that right now we can already inculcate entrepreneurs as young as senior high school students, including encouraging "technopreneurship". This helps them to harness and optimize their creativity even at a young age, which gives them an entrepreneurial mindset once they graduate, as well as familiarity with the digital tools that are available. We want to encourage the discipline of having technopreneurship and it should be incorporated in all courses at the early age in senior high school.

JS: Would the government help with financing these sorts of initiatives also?

Albarracin: We do have a Startup Grant Fund which provides funding twice a year, but as they are keen to filter out the best of the best, it is a long process. Above all, innovation needs to be scalable, and has to go beyond merely a simple innovation. It has to solve a certain problem in the areas of health or creativity or the economy or social innovation, or in food or finance.

There are lots of ideas and there is some funding but it is limited at the moment. We had a crowdfunding campaign during the pandemic, and there is also another start-up, but these are usually

for early-stage companies. We saw some crowdfunding in action during the pandemic, such as an initiative called “No one left behind”. We wanted to support our artisans during the pandemic and so we did one round of crowdfunding for that purpose. It’s more of a short campaign but in the future probably once we grow, we might have another round of crowdfunding.

APEC Financing

JS: You participated in the APEC program. There are some sponsorship programs for the benefit of women entrepreneurs in particular, so are these of interest to your company?

Albarracin: Yes definitely. I was part of the APEC Financing Opportunities Fair for Women-led MSMEs in 2019. I represented the Philippines in Taiwan and we actually did a pitch presentation to investors pre-pandemic. We actually won the pitch and were even given guidance on how to present to investors and how to create an exit plan and so on. I was also very inspired to meet the Hon. Kuniko Inoguchi from the Japanese Diet in Seattle in 2023 in one of the APEC Policy Partner Discussions and was very inspired by her story and what she does for women. So I do believe these networking opportunities gave us a boost, and there is another fund coming up in November. I think it is more about climate and gender so we are looking forward to that.

Help from Japan

JS: You work with many overseas companies in the



Photo: Camille Rose D. Albarracin

Camille Rose D. Albarracin (third from left) and Hon. Kuniko Inoguchi (second from right), Seattle in 2023.

course of your business, but how about Japan? How can the Japanese government or other sectors contribute to your business in future?

Albarracin: I think Japan is very much focused on sustainability, which is also a focal issue for the Philippines. I think the Japanese government would also help us when it comes to green funding, or to support SMEs or start-ups that are focused on providing sustainable solutions to big corporations. We really appreciate the Japanese market and our foldable slippers for hotels are in high demand, as they are made out of coconut waste and natural materials. I think the aesthetic or the product that we have matches the simplicity of Japanese culture, especially given that in terms of culture we all use slippers in Asia. So it would be great to see government policies that support the green economy and green funding even for micro and small businesses like ours, that would also open more trade agreements and easier access to the market in Japan.

JS: So does that mean free trade agreements would work well in promoting your business?

Albarracin: Japan is a very powerful economy in terms of leading innovation, so I feel there is potential for collaboration between the two economies in this area. Japan has technological prowess and we still need more ideas when it comes to innovation, especially for bio composite materials; we are working on a bio composite material that has multiple applications, including construction and furniture items.

Thoughts on Global Solutions on CO₂ Emissions

JS: Two questions related to public policy issues and one related to the environment. Your business is concerned with global environmental issues, but some developing countries may feel that CO₂ restrictions are unfair to them, as they need to achieve growth above all. Do you think there should be more leniency towards developing countries in terms of emissions compared to developed countries?

Albarracin: This is a very controversial issue. Post-pandemic there is

a big debate regarding the carbon emissions of each country. I think we should come together and not focus on whether emissions are produced by developing or developed nations and while it might sound idealistic, we should focus on the goal regardless of which nation or which economy you are in. I think it's more about encouraging sustainability practices that can improve resilience. So let's start from the bottom up. If we start from the ground up and even start on a domestic scale first, we can then go global. When it comes to advocacy and transformation, it really starts from the ground up. There is a tendency to focus on the numerical or technical aspects of carbon emissions, but as this is a climate emergency it is more important for developed countries to help developing countries to develop economic and sustainable resilience and to find a global solution in terms of resolving the problem.

Thoughts on Today's Political & Economic Turmoil

JS: The global economic landscape is not so promising currently, with rising interest rates and geopolitical risks. Would your business likely be affected by such external challenges?

Albarracin: We are affected but as I mentioned earlier, micro and small businesses like ours are more agile in adapting to these changing conditions and can pivot and capture each market. As we develop new products and new business models, we are more resilient to economic and geopolitical challenges compared to the bigger corporations because we are more flexible and more agile. But definitely when it comes to political issues, we are also affected by whatever happens nationally. Rather than focusing on the challenges, we like to regard them as an opportunity that can be tackled using innovation, and to focus on the positivity and outcomes on a smaller scale, which can then translate into bigger solutions on a global scale.

Future Business Plans

JS: My final question is regarding your future business plans. It is evident that you are strongly advocating a circular economy which is becoming a very popular concept today. So against this background perhaps you may have more ambitious

plans for your business?

Albarracin: Once we receive a grant from the Department of Science and Technology, we would like to further our cause. Aside from innovation, we also want to spread and share our knowledge to other economies, because we want everybody to be able to utilize natural resources in a more resilient way and push for sustainability. So our plans include developing more innovative products for circularity. We are a tropical country and have a lot of potential resources, and can also tap into other neighboring economies, while being a model for them. Everything starts from a small model which is then replicated and duplicated, and this is the approach we need to foster. Our plan is to go global and to be able to cater to various major hotel chains and industries that are aligned with our core values in terms of green growth, sustainability and bio-circularity.

JS: Finally, I understand that plastic waste is a key to achieving global environmental stability today, and that G7 countries are keen on this. Would this provide a good business opportunity?

Albarracin: Indeed there are good opportunities to utilize other plastic waste materials, but for now we are focusing on agriculture and textile waste for the next two to three years. We aspire to focus more on plastic waste in the future, as there are other social entrepreneurs who are doing so currently. The food industry is one area of interest as it utilizes plastic a lot, mainly for the purposes of food safety, but we do hope to see innovation in the next three to five years in terms of alternatives to plastic. I would also like to know what the international benchmarks are for utilizing plastic waste, such as what Japan is doing in this area. It really depends upon the exchange of best practices between each economy. If Japan has a solution already then it can probably be adapted to the Philippines, and likewise if we have other technologies then we can share them with other economies. This enables us to be more collaborative than competitive and the need for this has never been greater, as demonstrated during the pandemic. We are aiming for one goal: to have a more sustainable future for everyone and preserve more resources for future generations.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.