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When innovation meets the island: A lesson in localized commercialization from Palawan

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INVITED EDITORIAL

In research circles, we often celebrate innovation whether in new tools, new technologies, fresh discoveries. And rightly so. But here's the hard truth: a lot of these breakthroughs don't make it out of the lab. Despite the best efforts of our universities and research institutions, many technologies never reach the people who need them most.

Nowhere is this disconnecting more evident than in agriculture and aquaculture. In these fields, the right innovation can change lives – helping farmers produce more, spend less, and adapt to a changing climate. But how do we get those technologies into the hands of real people, in real communities?

That's the problem the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) set out to solve when it launched the Agri-Aqua Technology Business Incubation (ATBI) Program in 2017. The idea was simple but powerful: build platforms inside universities that help turn research into real-world solutions, especially for rural communities. These "incubators" would support startups, small enterprises, and grassroots associations—not just corporations. The program now spans 25 locations across the country. But one incubator, in a province known both for its beauty and complexity, is doing things a little differently—and with remarkable impact (Eugenio, 2025).

Palawan, widely regarded as the Philippines' "last ecological frontier," It's a place where environmental protection is a daily concern, where tourism and food security often clash, and where local communities are constantly navigating the push and pull of progress (Haworth et. al., 2024). In this unique landscape, Western Philippines University–Agri-Aqua Technology Business Incubator (WPU-ATBI) has carved out a path that might just redefine how we think about technology commercialization.

Instead of chasing big corporate deals or waiting for the "perfect" commercial partner, WPU-ATBI chose to work with the institutions that are already in the community: local government units (LGUs) and non-government organizations (NGOs). Why? Because these are the people running livelihood programs, disbursing funds, listening to local voices—and most importantly, they're trusted.

This approach redefines conventional commercialization strategies. Rather than transferring technology to the highest bidder, it emphasizes context-responsive deployment engaging directly with communities and enabling them to maximize the value of locally available resources. Such a model underscores inclusivity, sustainability, and the democratization of innovation.

A perfect example? The floating oyster bag. It wasn't designed by an engineer or a scientist, but by Ryan Tennefrancia, a gym instructor with a knack for practical problem-solving. Using recycled plastic bottles and chicken wire, he came up with a simple, affordable way to farm oysters. With support from WPU-ATBI, the design was refined, filed for intellectual property protection, and rolled out to communities. Today, fisherfolk associations in Dumaran and Araceli are using it. The LGU of San Vicente even included it in their local livelihood programs (Plasus, 2024).

That's what innovation looks like when it's grounded in reality. It's low-cost. It's sustainable. And most of all, it's relevant (Allal-Cherif et. al., 2025).

In places like Palawan, where people are constantly balancing preservation and progress, this kind of work isn't just useful—it's essential.

As we expand the Agriculture and Technology Business Incubator (ATBI) network, invest in incubator development, and sustain momentum for innovation, it is essential to reflect on the lessons exemplified by the WPU-ATBI. True success is not merely defined by the commercialization of technology, but by its strategic and thoughtful dissemination—anchored in local relevance, shared responsibly, and implemented with care. Ultimately, the most impactful innovations are those that transcend product development and effect meaningful, transformative change in people's lives.

Keywords: *agri-aqua innovation, agriculture, aquaculture, business incubation, sustainable development*

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