



Cooperation and Conflict Preparedness in the Philippines

By Sarah McNiece

The two-year Mindanao Disaster Preparedness and Response (DPR) project, implemented by Save the Children/US and funded by OFDA with \$500,000, has proven that organizations can work together to successfully meet the challenges of preparing for and responding to conflict situations.

This innovative program provides significant and timely assistance for IDPs affected by the deadly conflict between the Government of the Philippines (GOP) and the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front. Although a ceasefire was declared in 2001, a resurgence of the conflict in 2003 displaced approximately 400,000 people. Many people have since returned to their homes, but continued insecurity and extreme poverty still threaten the lives of returnees and the displaced. The DPR aims to mitigate the effects of the conflict and promote recovery in the region.

The key to the DPR's success has been the Mindanao Emergency Response Network (MERN). The MERN, with Save the Children/US in a facilitating role, comprises 40 local and international NGOs and representatives of the GOP working together to assist the people of Mindanao. In order to respond to displacement rapidly, the MERN has established two stockpiles of emergency commodities including blankets, shelter materials, and mosquito nets in Cotabato City and Zamboanga City. More than 50,000 displaced residents benefited from these commodities in FY 2004.

Save the Children/US provided small grants of up to \$5,000 to local NGOs for innovative humanitarian assistance projects implemented by MERN members. For example, one grant to a Filipino NGO, Community and Family Services International, funded the construction of four emergency shelters.



COURTESY OF SAVE THE CHILDREN/US

Children take classes at a learning center established by Community and Family Services International in Pagalungan, Maguidanao.

The structures are also used as “emergency learning centers” by children in the IDP camp with assistance from volunteer teachers. Thanks to these centers some children are attending school for the first time. Other grants have assisted children and adults with disabilities, repaired water systems, and established emergency medical and dental programs. In addition, reflecting OFDA’s disaster preparedness and mitigation approach, the DPR project enhances local NGO capacities to prepare for and respond to humanitarian emergencies by providing innovative training and workshops on disaster management, emergency assessments, IDP return and integration, and humanitarian protection.

An impressive achievement of the MERN is the spirit of cooperation engendered by the network. When

the MERN was first established in Mindanao, some local organizations were hesitant about working together and initially apprehensive about working with international NGOs and GOP representatives. However, one year after the creation of the MERN, these disparate organizations are working together towards a common goal with a shared vision, using agreed upon performance standards and codes of conduct.

According to Cynthia Guerra, the manager of the Save the Children/US program, “MERN symbolizes a Mindanao where diverse people live in harmony strengthened by its active and constructive will to ensure sustainable development efforts geared towards peace.”



COURTESY OF SAVETHE CHILDREN/US

Department of Social Welfare and Development Secretary Dinky Soliman assists with a distribution of relief supplies in Buliok.



COURTESY OF SAVETHE CHILDREN/US

A pre-school student practices at the chalkboard during a class for children of IDPs in Pagalungan, Maguindanao.