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*Resilience and How to Build a Healthy Community*

**Introduction**

The effects of typhoon Ketsana that struck the Philippines recently showed that calamities are natural equalizers. The calamity spared no one. Nature did not discriminate by class, gender, educational attainment, economic status, religion or age. The devastating results of the typhoon on people and the natural resources were caused by the failure of governance due to the incompatibilities of interests (social, economic, political, and environmental) between and among the different levels and agencies of the government. The conflict in the aftermath of the typhoon reflects the interplay of issues on health, livelihood, environment, economics and the populace. The disaster also gave face to the long term relationship of human activities to nature.

The multitude of people who were forced to live in very populated evacuation centers and dependent on relief and sympathy placed humanity's dignity at stake. Achieving peace in these conditions demands a comprehensive, multisectoral and integrated response that can only be achieved through the transformation of selfish interests to that of the community and by involving as many stakeholders as possible, rather than short-sighted interventions that are sectoral, political and geographical in nature. This transformation requires a realization of the interconnectedness of all people - the need for food to survive. Involving communities in the design and implementation of integrated approaches has been shown to be effective in food insecurity conflicts and similar response mechanisms could remediate other types of development challenges and calamities in the future.

Communities in the Philippines are experiencing innumerable challenges and conflicts related to politics, poverty, food insecurity, water and land boundary disputes, inequitable access to resources and economic development opportunities, and constraints on individual rights, including women's right to choose the when and how many children they want to bear. This paper focuses on the

experience of PATH Foundation Philippines (PFPI) and presents case studies that highlight issues that the project encountered in the coastal zone where it implemented an integrated approach to population and coastal resource management (IPOPCORM) for improved food security. The negotiations and the resolutions were facilitated by IPOPCORM's interdisciplinary approach which engaged a broad range of stakeholders from the public and private sectors and across the domains of health, environment and economic development in the pursuit of a common goal that required joint efforts and multiple interventions to adequately address food insecurity issues at the individual, structural and environmental levels.

Food security is the overarching theme of the IPOPCORM project which was implemented in thirty three (33) coastal municipalities that overlap priority marine corridors for biodiversity conservation and have high population growth rates, density and momentum. Local fisheries provide 80% of the dietary protein requirements of these rural coastal communities but their overfished state means less food for a growing number of people. Training of peer volunteers, local indigenous leaders and shopkeepers was one of the activities conducted to enable provision of information, education and conservation and family planning services in these far flung areas where fisher folk have large families and rely on fishing for sustenance and livelihood. More than 80% of the population in these areas are also Roman Catholics. In the country, there is a thin line between the church and state, and family planning and reproductive health are sensitive issues in these devout communities.

### **Positive and negative lessons in the field**

“Our problems are interconnected and the solutions need to be integrated”, noted a community resident in one of the coastal villages where PATH Foundation Philippines Inc. (PFPI) implemented the IPOPCORM approach. While issues of poverty and food insecurity may seem to be black tunnels, working together towards long-term, rather than immediate gains was a key element of the project's success. Listening to the people - men, women and youth – is necessary to close the divide and bridge the gaps in understanding about the interconnections between demographic, health and environment dynamics and their solutions. Program planners and managers need to learn from the community and politicians, academicians, leaders and think tanks need to listen to the people who, all too often, are overlooked in the formulation of development strategies and plans that affect their

lives. Two case studies that have provided valuable insights in efforts to capacitate the community and build resilience for improved food security are highlighted below:

### **Case 1: Religion, politics and the community**

While the project was delivering a community-based training to fisher peer educators and shopkeeper owners as partner implementers to educate and motivate members of the community on how “To plan their families and manage their coastal resources”, the local chief executive - a staunch Catholic - stormed the session and demanded that the training be stopped claiming that the project promotes promiscuity<sup>1</sup> and allows free sex in the community. The project implementers were threatened that a local ordinance will be passed to force the project out of the locality.

Convinced that the integrated approach has the potential to address the current food security crisis faced by the community and will generate positive results for the future of their children and other village residents, the community members and leaders themselves negotiated with the local executive to allow the training and the project to proceed. These negotiations were successful because the local community leaders intrinsically understood the links between population growth in their communities, their diminishing marine resources, and the impending conflict of food security. The project gave them the opportunity and a neutral forum to express these needs to the chief executive in a safe and persuasive fashion. Likewise, the trainers did not give up. Close dialogue with the local chief executive and the opportunity to see other successful and similar projects convinced the mayor to give the project a try. This would not have happened if the project was only focused on reproductive health and family planning, the fact that it was integrated with environment and people’s livelihoods was the best way to convince the chief executive to support family planning. To date, the local chief executive remains a champion in advocating for the integration of family planning and reproductive health in sustainable development and environmental management agendas. Integration, in this case, was key to reducing conflict between a strong religious and political conviction and local community’s needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Hernandez, E. From Roadblock to Champion. 2006. IPOPCORM project

## Case study 2: Live fish trade and marginal fishers

Commercial fishers particularly live fish traders that encourage the use of toxic substances like cyanide to stun the fish for live harvest have a huge income advantage in the Philippines due to the open water access regime, the lucrative price their catch gets on the global market and their more sophisticated methods and gear for resource extraction. Despite the millions of pesos that fisheries contributes to the Philippine economy each year, the small-scale and subsistence fishers (who usually have larger than average families) are still very poor. Surveys<sup>2</sup> in rural coastal villages indicate their average household income to be P20 (\$0.40) a day for a family of 5. Due to lack of alternative skills and employment opportunities and the demise of Philippine fisheries, they are unable to improve their situation and their quality of life. To address their basic family needs, the local fishermen put themselves at risk to supply live fish to the live fish traders by engaging in illegal and destructive fishing practices such as cyanide fishing and the use of air compressors to gather more high quality fish . In so doing, their marine resources which are also their main source of livelihood are also destroyed. Cyanide destroys the marine organisms that live in corals. It is usually applied directly to the corals and other substrate which hide the fish sought by live fishers. The use of air compressors allows fishers to dive deeper and stay underwater for longer periods of time but can cause decompression sickness and ultimately paralysis when used incorrectly. While the conflict on resource use is apparent, the illegal practice continues because local officials are involved or lack the will or means to enforce existing laws that protect the marine environment.

Cuyo Municipality is one area in the Philippines where the live fish trade and its negative environmental impacts are affecting local communities' lives and livelihoods and pitting them against their local officials, who are ultimately responsible for protecting the marine environment. Available information about the Lapulapu live<sup>3</sup>-fish in Cuyo indicates the catch totaled over 402 metric tons in 2001. There was a steady decrease of fish catch to 283 metric tons in 2002 which

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<sup>2</sup> Montebon et al. (2004) Behavioral Monitoring Surveys: Consolidated Report for the IPOPCORM project

<sup>3</sup> Suno .2003. A report on the Live fish business in Cuyo, Palawan and its effects on the community and marine resources

further declined in 2003. This trend may indicate the declining status of the coral reefs which poses alarming results to the local communities of Cuyo who depend on these reefs to supply the wide range of fish they catch and sell for a living, beyond just the live fish. These effects are especially experienced by the local artisanal fishers who use unsophisticated boats and fishing technologies but are experiencing decreasing fish catch in their municipal waters. They now travel farther to fish, which means use of more expensive inputs like gasoline, and their catches are smaller both in number and biomass. While their fish catch is lower, and income levels are noticeably lower, the commercial and live fish traders continue to flourish because they are using more efficient fishing gears, such as cyanide that are also more detrimental to marine-coastal ecosystems.

In addition to the existing conflict occurring at the local level as described in the Cuyo example, there is also disagreement regarding the implementation of the national fisheries code between national agencies particularly the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Department of Agriculture/Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR). The fisheries code which is supported by DENR affords small-scale fishers preferential access to municipal waters to avoid problems described above between commercial fishers and local artisanal fisheries. However, the DA/BFAR challenged the fisheries code and DENR's authority to issue such provision over municipal waters. The eventual resolution of this conflict provided absolute powers to the local government units (LGUs) to decide whether to follow the provision in the code or to allow commercial fishers to fish in their municipal waters. When some LGU officials are involved in commercial fishing operations, it is inevitable that the LGU will allow commercial fishers to fish in their municipal waters. This policy decision was a big setback for the coastal resource management activities in two of the IPOPCORM's project sites where local officials and their families were involved in the commercial fishing trade and most likely contributed to deepening poverty among subsistence fishers in those localities.

The conflict is apparent at different angles: the policies and the policymakers that should protect the local interests of the community are the same factors that have led to the abuse of local fishermen and their family's rights to food security. This was reflected in one survey where the majority of community respondents reported "our barangay (village) is helpless in protecting the environment" and "only the government can take care of natural resources." And while their marine resources

feed rich customers in the other parts of the country and in other parts of the world, the irony is that the communities lack enough fish to feed their families. In Cuyo, the local fishers wanted to protect their municipal waters and the fish and corals contained within them. Yet, they were helpless in the face of the their local government's policy to allow commercial fishers, and the destructive fishing methods they advocate, access to those waters.

Progress and gains through legal or policy options will take time. Meanwhile, programs on the ground establish longer term, sustainable gains that lead the communities to well being and empowerment. This was shown in the IPOPCORM project where activities that benefited the community such as capacity building of fisherfolks organization that enabled them to take care of their marine resources, provision of livelihood and involving women, men and youth in the implementation of the project have resulted in project appreciation and community empowerment and resilience.

There is an array of lessons learned from these case studies. From a non-government point of view and in the lens of integrating population interventions and measures in other sectors such as those of environment, economy and sustainable development, there are benefits and risks as follows:

- 1) Planning processes that are multi-sectoral, interdisciplinary and inclusive in nature are needed to address the complexity of issues underlying poverty and food insecurity in coastal Philippines and to enable local institutions and communities to achieve self-reliance. Smaller, healthier and more income-secure families working together to protect and conserve life-sustaining ecosystems are the pillars of resiliency and community empowerment.
- 2) The community is the best negotiator and bridge builder. They have the innate skills to balance actions. The tool they need is a clear and common understanding about the advantages of working towards a common goal that is also beneficial to them. Food security and a brighter future for their children and their community are common interests they have been involved in the process of planning, learning and reaping success. These in turn capacitate them to becoming healthier and better able to cope with conflicts, natural disasters and climate change.
- 3) There is no downside to integration. Population and environmental programs benefit from the strengths of each sector in reaching communities and achieving results.

- 4) Champions and leaders can be found in indigenous leaders, local governments, private sector and other partners. They pave the way to peacekeeping, they are facilitators and catalysts to successful community-based processes.
- 5) Marginalized communities are often the victims of food insecurity and poverty. The linkages of these factors with politics and business interests require political will, social corporate responsibility and civil society groups working together for change.

### **Barriers need to be overcome and/or questions to be answered to make progress in environmental peacemaking**

Utilization of resources and resource distribution inequities, poverty and lack of information and education, lack of opportunities and services pose barriers in environmental peacekeeping. The goal to transform the populace from being vulnerable to situations such as food insecurity towards well being and self sufficiency will require breaking the traditional stovepipe responses to complex issues through dialogues for partnership between communities and across sectors; consistent and synergistic actions and efforts; monetary support; and leadership. These balancing acts lead to progress towards peace in communities.

To achieve a positive perception of the future in these communities which is central to environmental peacekeeping<sup>4</sup>, there is a need to scale-up small gains to larger scales that leads to wider reach and sustainability. Although this is widely acknowledged and understood by both policymakers and practitioners, the question remains of how to achieve this scale up across a geographic scale as well as across the difference between individual communities. Despite this, widespread and focused efforts can reach more people. More communities that are healthier, wealthier, informed and capacitated to cope and adaptable to changes will create bigger impact and sustainable gains.

**Reflect on how linkage among different levels (individual, community, state, international, community and topics (environmental, developmental, conflict, peace) are made and sustained and the barriers for such linkage**

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<sup>4</sup> Friends of the Middle East . Environmental Peacebuilding Theory and Practice. 2008

Food security is a universal issue. While it is a cause of conflict, it can also provide a common ground for diverse interest in partnership towards food stability, environmental conservation and peace especially in poor rural communities. Case in point was the role of IPOPCORM in environmental peacebuilding in the Danajon Double Barrier Reef Bay. The bay which provides food and livelihood to over 1 million people living in the 19 municipalities in 4 provinces in the Philippines is also the major source of disagreements particularly with delineation of water boundaries and differences in local governing laws in their jurisdiction. The IPOPCORM project encouraged and forged dialogues and discussions towards ecosystems-based management of the Danajon Bay for food security which facilitated the signing of a memorandum of agreement between the various stakeholders.

At the household level, the domino effect from the lack of enough food to feed large families resulting in malnutrition, conflict and increased pressure on the environment and natural resource base affects human and ecosystem health and wellbeing, and the peace of the nation as a whole.

In the case of the live fish trade, the interest of both national and international businesses and consumers encouraged commercial fishers to engage in unsustainable and destructive fishing which resulted in conflict among local communities, commercial fishers, local government executives and other resource users that want to reduce fishing effort. The demand and supply chains sustain this linkage. Unless balanced, sustainable, multisectoral and integrated efforts are instituted that will honor the culture, livelihood, dignity and life of the resources and communities, peace will remain an unattainable goal.

Many questions remain. How long must such initiatives be in place? How much will they cost and who should fund them? Will they ultimately work, and if so, is this success sustainable? These questions will also pose as barriers for the linkages across sectors, groups, individuals, communities and nations. Initiatives that look at short-term results will have short-term peace building outcomes. The formula for peace needs to be consistent, encompassing, linked, trusting and dynamic to changes and time.

