

# Implementing Education and Youth Development Programming in the Fragile Context of Mindanao, Philippines



Mindanao is at the southern end of the Philippine archipelago and represents one-third of the Philippines' territory. It comprises 5 of the country's 17 administrative regions, along with Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which was created as part of a long-negotiated, though short-lived, peace treaty under President Corazon Aquino in 1989.

Mindanao has been the traditional homeland of [Muslim Filipinos](#) dating back to the early 10th century and the coming of Islam through trade with Arab merchants. The Muslim inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines, known as Moros, have resisted assimilation into the Christianized national culture for centuries.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Muslim minority launched an armed struggle for their ancestral homeland, seen as another chapter in the long-lasting struggle for their social identity, economic security, and autonomy. Since then, the confrontations between Muslim separatists in Mindanao and the Philippine government have resulted in the deaths of more than 120,000 people and the displacement of more than 2 million people.<sup>1</sup> The conflict has led to widespread poverty in war-torn areas, especially in the ARMM, which is the country's poorest region, where average annual income was \$2,025 in 2006, less than one-third that of Manila.<sup>2</sup>

To complicate the situation, in addition to the Muslims' fight for autonomy and self-rule, there has been an increase in clan-based conflict and criminal activity, including widespread banditry, rampant kidnap-for-ransom activities, and other crimes resulting from unstable security, especially in western Mindanao.

## Challenges to Project Interventions in This Fragile Context

The Education Quality and Access for Learning and Livelihood Skills Project, Phase 2 (EQuALLS2), is a funded intervention of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) being implemented in three Mindanao regions (Regions IX, XII, and ARMM). Within the fragile political structure and communities of these regions, The Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), has been implementing the project since 2006. EDC has invested in building social capital with community members and Mindanao government officials as an integral part of building the government's capacity to deliver services within the education and youth development sectors to those communities most affected by conflict and poverty in Mindanao.

The main challenges to implementation have come from, first, the tensions between the two governments that simultaneously control the regions and, second, ongoing threats of violence.

<sup>1</sup>Schiavo-Campo, S., & Judd, M. (2005, February). The Mindanao conflict in the Philippines: Roots, costs and potential peace dividend (p. 5). Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved from [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/214578-1111996036679/20482477/WP24\\_Web.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/214578-1111996036679/20482477/WP24_Web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Wikipedia (n.d.). Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Retrieved September 21, 2011, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomous\\_Region\\_of\\_Muslim\\_Mindanao#Economy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomous_Region_of_Muslim_Mindanao#Economy)

## **Coordination and cooperation with government officials**

The armed Mindanao conflict has affected project objectives and activities at many levels. Having two separate and distinct governments and departments of education (DepED National and DepED-ARMM) required consistent and added levels of consultations and involvement to align the program with the strategic objectives of the two governments; maintain clear coordination, communication, and cooperation; and gain trust and commitment at the local level.

## **On-going threats of violence**

Because the project operates in the country's most fragile communities, there are daily threats of violence, kidnapping for ransom (KFR), and other menaces that negatively affect the ability of project staff and beneficiaries to travel to and from scheduled activities. Consequently, EDC is frequently required to suspend community activities when the situation is not safe. In some cases, program participants are transported out of conflict-affected communities (impacting the project's budget) so that activities can continue.

Incidents of crime and security have negatively impacted project implementation:

- Explosions and bombings in Zamboanga and Cotabato, two cities where field offices are located, together with gun battles between suspected militants and the Philippine Marines/Armed Forces of the Philippines in Basilan, restricted staff travel.
- In September 2011, thirteen alleged members of the Moro National Liberation Front and two soldiers were killed on a EQUALLS2 school construction site in Sulu, during an attack involving mortars, machine guns and rifles. Despite being outnumbered, the troops from the Philippines Marine battalion held their ground until two MG-520 helicopter gunships arrived to drive away the rebels.
- In August 2010, a suicide bomb exploded at the Zamboanga airport arrival area just minutes after the office manager and driver of EDC's Zamboanga office had departed to meet a visiting USAID worker. This kind of incident frightened and stressed all project staff.
- The kidnapping and beheading of a school principal in Sulu, whose family was unable to pay the ransom, resulted in the temporary closure of 60 percent of the schools supported by the project. Persistent threats to teachers and even project staff in Sulu were also experienced.
- The national elections in May 2010 produced violence throughout several project sites in Mindanao, which restricted travel and implementation of project activities.
- A politically motivated massacre in November 2009 in Maguidanao, killing 57 people—including local politicians and their relatives, over 30 journalists, and other innocent people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—resulted in restrictions of staff travel.

# Measures to Mitigate Conflict-Driven Barriers

Within this conflict environment, EDC has implemented a number of key managerial and programmatic measures to mitigate the barriers that conflict can create for project implementation:

- Ensured swift programmatic flexibility, modifying training schedules and providing training in neighboring communities
- Developed programs to respond to demand: social development (education and youth programming) needs expressed by local government officials and community members
- Conducted thorough security planning, including a complete project-level and contextualized security plan, training, protocols, and focal persons; maintained clear security protocols and regular security updates for field staff working within the conflict environment
- Engaged stakeholders (government officials at every level, community members) to increase support at the local level through close working relationships, creating a sense of confidence and mutual support as well as a vested interest and feeling of co-ownership during the implementation of project activities
- Enabled local field staff to manage all field level operations based on an in-depth understanding of the local environment and an ability to build trust and confidence with their fellow countrymen

## Interventions to Reduce Fragility and Conflict

*Civil conflict always destroys much more than physical plants and infrastructure. The core of the damage is done to the fabric of society, to the stock of social capital. Social capital is essentially trust capital that, unlike physical capital, grows as it is used.<sup>3</sup>*

Although the EQuALLS2 project doesn't include conflict mitigation as an explicit objective, the project has focused on education and livelihood work in this region as a direct response to the higher concentrations of poverty levels and conflict. As part of a multi-dimensional development approach, USAID has used education and economic growth as stabilizing activities in communities. Within the context of the Mindanao conflict, EQuALLS2 has worked with the Philippine Department of Education (DepED) and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) to implement programs that provide safe and productive options for children and youth—helping them to attend a quality public school or madrasah, achieve a high school equivalency certificate, or gain a livelihood skill that could lead to expanded income pathways.

Following are some highlighted outcomes in support of USAID's efforts to help conflict-affected communities rebuild a peaceful economy:

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid: page 9.

## **Out-of-school youth have been trained in workforce skills or received an alternative basic education.**

- More than 35,000 out-of-school youth attended trainings in workforce skills that were needed in their communities.
- More than 70,000 out-of-school youth participated in alternative basic education courses, resulting in a marked increase in the number of youth passing the high school equivalency exam.

## **School-aged children and youth have access to safe, quality learning environments.**

- 161 public school classrooms and 540 upgraded community-learning centers have been newly constructed or renovated to house more than 425,000 elementary students and youth across over 1,000 conflict-affected communities in Mindanao.
- Schools and learning centers have an additional 1.8 million books, posters, notebooks and other learning materials as well as teachers and youth center facilitators trained to improve their instruction.

## **Communities are supporting their schools.**

- More than 700 PTAs and local school boards have become better functioning organizations, enabling them to effectively manage resources and plan and execute school improvement plans.
- In some communities, PTAs are working with parents, community members, and local government leaders to implement an education report card system called the Village Education Report Card (VERC). VERC tracks performance indicators related to physical facilities, learners' performance, teaching and learning resources, and community participation. In areas where conflict is more acute and where there are displaced families, communities also use the VERC to measure the extent to which schooling continues in times of armed conflict.

## **Programming for Education in Emergencies (EiE)**

Education can provide physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection in disaster areas and insecure environments. With training and support, communities can normalize and stabilize these insecure periods, using the continuity of school days to mitigate the psychosocial impact and provide physical protection from the exploitation that many times comes with instability. Some EQuALLS2 activities in Mindanao were designed to directly address the emergencies bred by ongoing conflict. These activities included education and disaster planning, peace building, and conflict resolution—all essential elements to stabilizing a local economy. The program has helped communities prepare continuity of education plans during times of conflict, disaster, and emergency. For example, when fighting broke out in Datu Piang, EQuALLS2 conducted seminars for teachers and provided learning materials

for use in child-friendly spaces. Ensuring that students can stay focused on their lessons within a supportive learning environment even during high conflict periods helps to address their psychosocial needs during these disruptive and frightening episodes.

## Evidence of EQuALLS’s effectiveness in a fragile environment

EQuALLS2 has provided increased access to quality elementary school education and youth skills training programs for children and youth in close to 1,000 conflict-affected communities in Mindanao. The project’s ability to successfully implement education and youth development programs during some of the most challenging years of insecurity and conflict in Mindanao is demonstrated in large part by its achievement of targets that were set in 2006. Given the unanticipated level of violent conflict in areas served by the project, this is no small feat.

Table 1 provides an overview of the project’s achievements in terms of USAID’s quantitative indicators. The table details that across indicators, EDC has mitigated the challenges raised by conflict and accomplished, or is on track to accomplish by December 2011 (project completion date), the project targets agreed to with USAID in 2006.

**Table 1. Indicators of EQuALLS2 achievements**

<b>Indicators of achievements</b>	<b>Targets</b>	<b>End of project achievements</b>
Classrooms repaired	1,180	1,242
Classrooms constructed	120	183
Learners enrolled in primary schools or equivalent non-school-based settings	310,000	465,574
PTAs or similar “school” governance structures supported	850	1,326
Administrators and officials trained in school finance, management, or governance	2,238	3,551
Teachers/educators trained	35,000	38,490
Textbooks and other learning materials provided	1,800,000	2,116,701
Persons participating in workforce development programs	35,000	41,433
Workforce development initiatives through public-private partnerships assisted	12	33
Out-of-school youth enrolled in basic education programs	70,000	71,198
Community Incentive Grants awarded	n/a	810
Learners enrolled under the Scholarship Program	750	758

EDC has also helped institute measures that will assist in scaling up and sustaining its interventions. These include the following:

- Communities are mobilizing one-to-one financial and other contributions for school improvement initiatives as a result of PTA and LSB training.
- DepED has issued legal documents to institutionalize the Learning Partnership Program, which uses a mentoring approach that is initiated with help from the project.
- A VERC approach has been adopted by local government units and DePED.
- Legal bodies have been created at the local level to institutionalize the education and livelihood skills planning process initiated by the project.

EDC is completing a range of post-project assessments to demonstrate impact as a result of project interventions. These include assessing gains in teachers' content knowledge of English, science, and math, and an analysis of student achievement test scores. Initial findings reveal that the depth and quality of education and youth programming has made a positive impact on teachers' and students' performance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, while conflict mitigation was not an explicit EQuALLS2 project design element, EDC and its partners have provided safe and productive options for children and youth, thus helping to stabilize some of Mindanao's most fragile communities. EQuALLS2 reached its targets, demonstrated early signs of impact, and developed approaches that have been institutionalized and sustained by the ministries and communities.

Though lacking conclusive evidence, project staff attribute their success in large part to the social capital they built with local officials and community members. Through organizations such as LBSs, PTAs, and community-based associations, staff have helped mobilize community support for education improvement. This local support has translated into added security for staff when working in those communities.