



STORIES FROM PEACEBUILDING & HUMANITARIAN ACTIONS

PHILIPPINES



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ACCESS BRIDGE
Assisting Most Vulnerable Communities and Schools
Affected by Complex Emergencies Access Quality and
Timely Humanitarian and Disaster Preparedness Services
Civil Society, Women, and Youth
Promoting Culture of Peace in
Mindanao, Philippines

ACCESS (Assisting the Most Vulnerable Communities and Schools Affected by Complex Emergencies in Accessing Quality and Timely Humanitarian and Disaster Preparedness Services) is a multi-year, multi-sectoral project funded by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and implemented by consortium members ACCORD Incorporated, Action Against Hunger Philippines, CARE Philippines, Community Organizers Multiversity, Humanity & Inclusion (HI) Philippines, Integrated Mindanaoans Association for Natives, Inc. (IMAN), Leading Individuals to Flourish and Thrive Inc. (LIFT), Mindanao Organization for Social and Economic Progress, Inc. (MOSEP), National Rural Women Coalition (PKKK), Notre Dame of Jolo College, and Save the Children Philippines.

BRIDGE (Civil Society, Women and Youth Promoting Culture of Peace in Mindanao) is funded by the European Commission and implemented by ACCORD Incorporated, CARE Philippines, Community Organizers Multiversity, and Oxfam Pilipinas.

Agusan (Caraga, Mindanao),
home to some of the Talaandig Tribe
| © CARE Philippines 2024

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Story and photos by ACCORD Incorporated and CARE Philippines



A tribal leader speaks during the May 2024 peace dialogue in Agusan | © ACCORD Incorporated 2024

AGUSAN, CARAGA — For twenty years, a deep rift split this indigenous community in the Philippines.

What started as a territorial dispute in 2000 evolved into an intense conflict over resources, ideologies, and leadership, eventually spiraling into violence, displacement, and the loss of many lives. It also prevented the formation of a unified council needed to secure the tribe's land rights.

With climate change and environmental degradation potentially making scarce resources even scarcer, escalation seemed almost inevitable.

But now, two decades later, both sides are taking crucial steps toward reconciliation.

Clearing a path to peace

The Talaandig, the smallest indigenous group in the Philippines' Caraga Region in Mindanao, is a dwindling tribe with fewer than 2,000 families. The conflict forced some to flee deep into the forests, limiting their access to education and basic services mostly available in the lowlands.

Many of its youth also struggle to maintain their traditional way of life and cultural identity due to discrimination and limited opportunities for learning and livelihood.

For years, the tribe tried to settle the dispute, but insufficient resources and the periodic recurrence of violence made it challenging. With facilitation from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and support from the European Commission-funded BRIDGE project, members of the Talaandig tribe recently gathered for a peace dialogue.

The goal was to bridge the long-standing divide by openly and respectfully talking about misunderstandings and grievances, committing to preventing future conflicts, and (re)uniting in their claim over their shared ancestral domain. This included establishing clear land boundaries and facilitating the creation of the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) to strengthen their legal claim.

"We can't ignore the hurt this conflict has caused our families and the damage it's done to our relationships, but I truly believe that, by starting this dialogue today, we can begin to heal," said a tribal leader.

This landmark event opened a new chapter for the tribe. "From now on, there will be no more bloodshed," declared one tribal chieftain.

"We can't ignore the hurt this conflict has caused our families and the damage it's done to our relationships, but I truly believe that, by starting this dialogue today, we can begin to heal," said another tribal leader.

The peace dialogue

While the dialogue itself took place within a day, most participants spent one day traveling to the venue and another day returning home. For some, because they lived in such remote, "last mile" areas, the journey to the venue involved two days of walking barefoot. Yet, for something that had been out of reach for two decades and for which they spent years preparing, it seemed a reasonable price to pay.

The event began with a traditional Talaandig ceremony invoking peace and unity, led by the tribe's elders.

Two *datus*, or tribal chieftains, from the conflicting parties presented their perspectives, detailing the origins and consequences of the territorial dispute. Elders, women, and youth from both sides shared insights and recounted their genealogy, the conflict's history, and its impact on their community.

The group that remained in the original settlement in the lowlands spoke of their community's milestones, including having two college graduates who are now teachers, and said they hoped these could serve as an inspiration to others and a testament to what the Talaandig can achieve given the opportunity.

Mediators also played a key role, helping pave the way for a peace agreement by using the appropriate mediation processes. Mediators included the Municipal Tribal Chieftain Datu Raul Minglana, Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR) of San Luis Bae Ederlina Precioso, NCIP Regional Director Ordonio P. Rocero, and NCIP Lawyer Atty. Fritzie Lynne Sumando. BRIDGE project staff, and personnel from the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office, served as secretariat and witnesses to the dialogue. The DepEd teachers also conducted a learner mapping to assess the educational needs of the community, especially in alternative learning systems.

Talaandig women’s voices

Women were instrumental in the peace process by documenting the dialogue and providing significant information to complete the tribe’s history. They also lent the discussion a nurturing and caring lens, helping participants see possible ways to heal past wounds. The event underscored the importance of inclusive participation, involving women in reconciliation and decision-making.

Resolution and future steps

To close the dialogue, the *datus* exchanged metal bracelets to symbolize their commitment to peace. They reached a tentative agreement on land boundaries and the establishment of the CADT, and all parties pledged to maintain the peace and

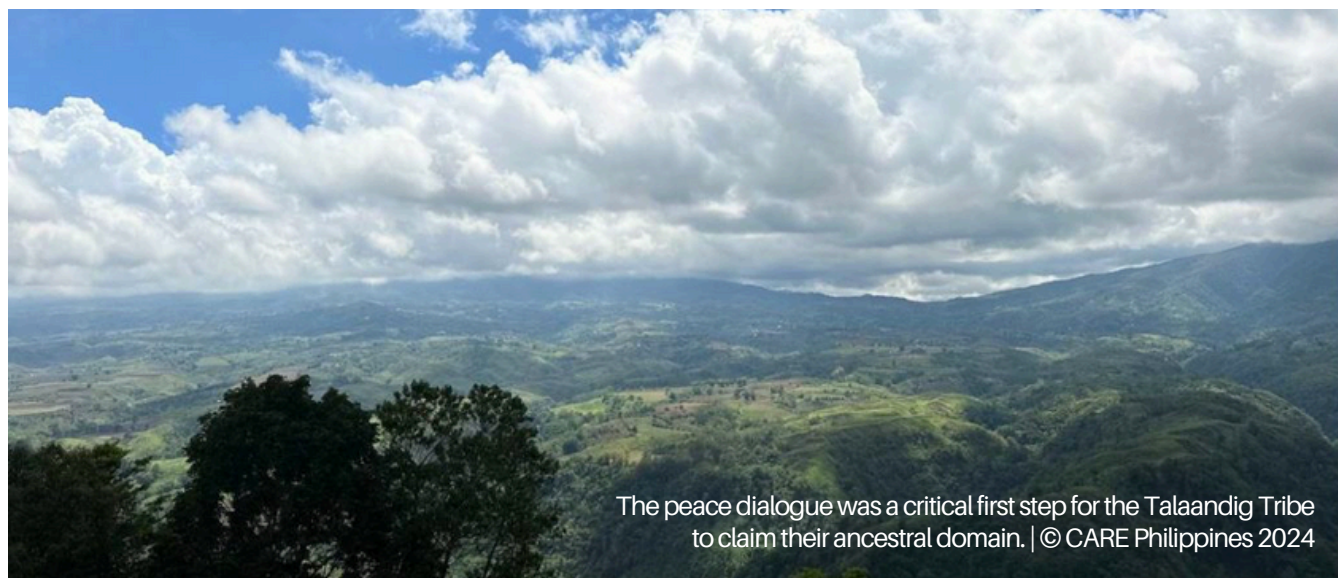
prevent future conflicts. They also agreed to support each other’s aspirations for a dignified life by educating their children and ensuring equitable access to their ancestral land’s resources.

From humanitarian aid to peacebuilding

The dialogue partially illustrates what working within the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus looks like, and how humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives can build upon each other’s gains. In Mindanao, ACCORD, CARE, and partners implement two projects intentionally designed to complement each other: ACCESS, which addresses urgent humanitarian needs, and BRIDGE, which focuses on peacebuilding.

Months before the dialogue, a group from the tribe — who had been experiencing chronic violence, threats, and harassment for years — was given food, shelter, WASH (water supply, sanitation, and hygiene promotion), health, and civil registration assistance by the EU Humanitarian Aid-funded ACCESS Project. Seeing an opportunity to ask for help and give his people a better future, the group’s leader sought the project’s help in organizing a discussion with the other Talaandig groups. Through BRIDGE, the team from ACCORD supported NCIP in setting up the much-needed talk.

With the NCIP’s partnership with BRIDGE, initial aid from ACCESS, and the Talaandig Tribe’s commitment to peace, cultural preservation, and self-determination, this decades-long conflict may finally be coming to a close. ■



The peace dialogue was a critical first step for the Talaandig Tribe to claim their ancestral domain. | © CARE Philippines 2024



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Empowering Remote Villages with Accessible Water

Story by Action Against Hunger Philippines

Photos by Shirin Bhandari for Action Against Hunger Philippines

MABINI, DAVAO DE ORO — “We had to cross the mountain to fetch water,” Michelle Esperanza, 36, recalls. The rough terrain and muddy dirt paths made it hard for the residents of the remote mining town of Sitio Mascareg, in the community of Barangay Anitapan to collect water for drinking, bathing, and usage for their daily chores.

Getting clean water was already a chore for some families in Mascareg. But this became a bigger struggle in the first quarter of 2024 after Davao de Oro experienced a succession of rains and floods that triggered landslides across the hilly area. This destroyed homes and roads and cut off families like Michelle’s from their water source.

“We were asked to evacuate our homes in February 2024. The heavy rains caused landslides in the surrounding areas, destroying most of the roads that lead up here,” says Michelle.

Whenever it rains hard, it makes the town equally vulnerable. Aside from restricting their movement to fetch water, flooding destroys and contaminates water sources. Without clean water, illnesses like diarrhea, parasites, and chronic intestinal inflammation are common. It also prevents children from absorbing key nutrients and makes them more susceptible to malnutrition and other health issues. This was a main concern for Michelle and her husband having children themselves.

In the initial days of the flood's aftermath, affected families needed basic supplies such as food and clean water. With the support of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), they received emergency aid on water, sanitation, and hygiene through the ACCESS project. Water kits which contained basic hygiene items, jerry cans, and water purification tablets to name a few, were also provided.

Aside from WASH support, families in Anitapan that were affected by the flood also received multi-purpose cash assistance thanks to the funding support of ECHO. Families who lost their livelihoods like Michelle's used the cash assistance to buy basic supplies while they looked for other means to provide for their families. "The cash provided by Action Against Hunger and ECHO allowed me to buy the essentials, like rice, food, and medicine. There are not enough livelihood opportunities in our area, so this was a great help to all of us," Michelle smiles.



The remote location of Sitio Mascareg limits livelihood opportunities. Jay-ar works as a part-time electrician; Michelle tends to their home and children. | © Shirin Bhandari for Action Against Hunger Philippines 2024

"It has been life-changing. We do not have to go far or climb steep hills just to wash our clothes. Now we have safe water to drink, cook with, and clean ourselves and our homes," says Michelle.

Emergency response efforts do not stop there. More than providing immediate life-saving aid at the onset of the disaster, we remained in close coordination with the province of Davao De Oro in continuously assessing the situation of the flood-affected areas in the municipalities of Mabini, Mawab, Maco, Nabunturan, and its displaced communities. Sitio Mascareg was one of those in dire need of immediate access to safe water and improved WASH facilities.

Action Against Hunger's ACCESS team has since installed a water pump facility adjacent to the barangay hall and community basketball court of Sitio Mascareg. Family members arrive with blue water containers to fill up. Getting water is

no longer an ordeal since they can now fill their buckets with potable water just a few steps away from their homes.

"I do not have to cross mountains to fetch water, our town is overjoyed. We are thankful that Action Against Hunger continues to check on us. It has been life-changing, we do not have to go far or climb steep hills just to wash our clothes. Now we can have safe water to drink, cook, and clean ourselves and our homes," Michelle smiles.

Over 150 families in Anitapan, including Michelle's will now have easier and safer access to clean water with the rehabilitated water system that came with a newly installed solar light. ■

Building Back Safer After Super Typhoon Egay

Story by ACCORD Incorporated and CARE Philippines
Photos by CARE Philippines



Miriam's new house, built using build back safer techniques (left); the shack they sheltered in during the storm (right). | © CARE Philippines 2024

BANGUED, ABRA — When Super Typhoon Egay (international name: Doksuri) struck the Philippines in July 2023, its rapid intensification took many by surprise. It dumped more than a month's worth of rain in two days, damaged some 56,000 houses, and affected three million people.

Miriam Bisares, 31, lost her home and almost all possessions. She lives with her husband and three children in a barangay (village) by a river in Abra, one of the worst-hit provinces. Running to safety that day was not easy. Her two older kids, ages 14 and 12, were ill with chicken pox and had to be carried. The flood submerged the paths to higher ground, so they had to cut a way through a thick tangle of grass and shrubs.

Today, her community remembers it as a difficult time, but alongside memories of the trials are ones of coming together and rebuilding. And despite the challenges, women like Miriam demonstrated capable leadership, playing a crucial part in helping her community learn how to become more resilient by building safer homes, with support from the European Union Humanitarian Aid and the ACCESS Project.

“We lost almost everything.”

In the 14 years Miriam’s family had lived in Barangay Sao-atan in Bangued, Abra Province, they hadn’t experienced flooding as destructive as Super Typhoon Egay. Their old shack — made of light materials and located a few meters away from the edge of a river cliff — was swept away completely.

With their irregular income, recovery was hard. She occasionally finds work in sales as a “push girl” and “promodiser,” and her husband is a merchandiser at a food manufacturing company.

That Barangay Sao-atan lies next to a river is both a blessing and a burden: on the one hand, residents get to plant crops on its fertile banks; on the other, it makes the village flood-prone. The river also serves as a source of water for household use. During the rainy season, however, the water becomes murky and unusable. During dry spells, the river contracts, and residents have to climb down and up the steep river cliff while balancing one or two buckets.

Through the ACCESS Project, Miriam and other residents severely affected by the typhoon received shelter repair kits and training sessions on building back safer.

Recovering together, one house at a time

When the floodwaters receded, cleanup — a community endeavor — commenced. Miriam and her family stayed with a relative for one month. Thanks to another relative, who owned an unproductive lot in an elevated part of the village and who let Miriam and other neighbors rebuild their houses on it, those affected by the flood could start anew in a safer location.

Through the ACCESS Project, the community received shelter repair kits and training sessions on building back safer. The project encouraged the community to work together to rebuild each other’s homes. It also formed a shelter roving team, a group of community members that ensured houses were repaired or rebuilt properly.

As part of the team, Miriam became well-versed in Building Back Safer (BBS) principles. She can explain why having strong bracing, interlocking joints, anchored posts, and other BBS techniques are key to building safer homes.

A month before Christmas, Miriam and her family moved into their new house.

Clean, accessible water

The project also built a water system and held hygiene promotion activities. There are shaded benches near the water system where women sometimes congregate, working on chores together, or just staying for a chat.

“The elders say it’s a miracle we now have water. That was always a problem here,” says Miriam.

These days, Miriam and her husband are focused on taking care of the children. He cooks for them before leaving for work; she walks them to and from school. Asked what aspirations she has for the family, she says, "I hope we can support the three of them so they can finish school and have a better future."

ACCESS gave shelter assistance to some 1,650 individuals and repaired 530 houses across the provinces of Abra and Cagayan. ■



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