

## Providing Shelter, Understanding Culture, and Anticipating Needs of the Displaced

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### Abstract

Violent conflicts throughout the world dominate today's news reports. Everywhere bloody clashes are disrupting lives and producing refugees. Compounding the problem are simultaneous natural disasters that also destroy homes and disrupt lives. Some of the refugees cross national borders and become wards of major international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Other refugees are dislocated within their own countries and become major problems for local governments. Problems of assisting refugees are always difficult, but they are exacerbated when, as often happens, refugees come from diverse ethnic groups with widely differing needs. This case study from Zamboanga City in the Philippines illustrates both the general problem of assisting refugees and the more challenging problem of assisting multi-ethnic groups of refugees.

**Keywords:** Philippines, Zamboanga, Refugees, Urban Housing, *Buggoc* Build

### Introduction

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees' "Global Trends Report" (UNHCR 2013) showed an increase in global displacement from 42.5 million at the end of 2011 to more than 45.2 million in 2012. The Report further shows that the crisis in Syria emerged as a major new factor for global displacement and that war, overall, remained the dominant cause. More than half of the refugees and internally displaced were from war-torn countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Syria. Adding to the tragedy are the man-made disasters brought about by strife, ironically often waged in the name of a loving and merciful God.

Internal displacement is defined by the United Nations as a situation in which "persons or groups of persons ... have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border" (United Nations, Guiding Principles... 1998).

While UNCHR notes that these internal refugees are among the most vulnerable in the world, a major determinant of their condition lies in the character of local government.

The Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement worldwide, reported that

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the displacement of at least 120,000 people and the destruction of an estimated 10,000 homes was the result of the 3-week attack on Zamboanga City by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which occurred in September 2013 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2014). Heavy rains further worsened the humanitarian emergency that ensued. The influx of flood victims added to the already dire conditions in the evacuation centers, creating a crisis never before seen in the city.

## The Setting

Zamboanga is one of the oldest cities in the Philippines. Nestled at the southwest corner of the country's second largest island, Mindanao, it lies along an ancient trade route that remains a vibrant economic hub, the gateway to the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines – East ASEAN Growth Area. Ancient artefacts, as well as folklore, show that early inhabitants had been trading with seafarers as far as the Arabian Peninsula, the European continent and the Asian mainland even before the dawn of recorded history. This was also the route by which Arab and Indian traders brought Islam to the Philippines in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Due to its strategic, political and economic importance, Zamboanga City, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was declared the capital of the Moro Province that comprised the entire island of Mindanao.

The overall topography of the city is rolling to very steep. There are some flat lands, mostly narrow strips along the east coast. The urban center itself is mostly flat with a gentle slope to the interior, with an average elevation of nine meters. An irregular coastline on both the southwest and eastern sides of the city gives way to generally fertile terrain and occasional stretches of sandy and rocky beaches. The coastal profile generally slopes abruptly to the sea.

The city's climate is naturally mild, with a defined wet season from June to November and a pronounced dry season from December to May. While the city is fortunate to lie outside the typhoon belt, recent climate changes that bring about the El Niño and La Niña Southern Oscillations have resulted in intermittent cold and dry spells. These phenomena cause flooding and droughts that result in massive destruction to lives and property and adversely affect the local economy. Although lying within the boundaries of the Pacific Ring of Fire, the city has been spared from destructive earthquakes. Its geographic location, however, makes it vulnerable to tsunamis or storm surges.

Geographic location, early relations with its neighbors, and the 300-year domination by Spain, make Zamboanga one of the country's most culturally diverse cities. Although Christians of various denominations comprise 73 percent of its population, Muslims and other major indigenous cultures easily mix into one unique and distinct *Zamboangueño* character. *Chavacano*, an amalgam of about 30 per cent Spanish and a sprinkling of other major dialects, is spoken only in Zamboanga. For this reason, aside from being known as the "City of Flowers," it is also known as "Asia's Latin City."

With a population of 880,712 (2010 census), Zamboanga City is growing at a rate of about 3.5 percent per year, making it the 6<sup>th</sup> most populous city in the country. In terms of space it is the country's third largest city, covering a land area of 148,338 hectares that span 98 *barangays* (wards), 30 of which are within the urban core and 68 that are rural.

## The Problem

Early on September 9, 2013, residents of Santa Catalina, Santa Barbara, and nearby Rio Hondo were awakened to the sound of gunfire. Some 600 fully armed members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Misuari Faction, entered the city by way of its southern shores. The MNLF planned to march toward City Hall, reportedly to establish an independent Bangsamoro Republik. Before the MNLF could execute its plan, the rebels were repulsed by combined forces of the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The date marked the first day of what would turn out to be a lengthy, deadly, and massively devastating four weeks of the Zamboanga Crisis (Office of Civil Defense, PCNA, 2013).

While the rebels were able to gain a foothold in only six of the 98 *barangays* of Zamboanga, these areas comprised the heart of the city's commercial and financial districts and were locations of vital government offices and facilities. The incursion brought virtually all activities in the city to a halt (OCD, PCNA, 2013).

With the Central Business District shut down during the siege, the local economy was crippled. Zamboanga International Airport and Seaport were closed. Work and school classes were suspended and a curfew imposed. The neighboring provinces and cities also were affected since all forms of transportation to and from Zamboanga were suspended for days, hampering the flow of commodities. The total damage to various vital sectors of the city was estimated at 3.2 billion pesos while loss to infrastructure was estimated at 2.8 billion pesos (USD 68 and 63 million, respectively) (OCD, PCNA, 2013).

The siege resulted in the deaths of over 400 people. Some 200 civilians were taken hostage and used as human shields by the rebels. As mentioned earlier, more than 10,000 houses were damaged or destroyed, which led to the displacement of over 120,000 individuals consisting of over 20,000 families. Most of the displaced persons were housed in makeshift shelters along R. T. Lim Boulevard, the Joaquin Enriquez Memorial Sports Complex, and school buildings and *barangay* halls all over the city.

As though the man-made humanitarian crisis were not enough, Zamboanga was pummeled by 5-days of continuous rain in October 2013, which inundated agricultural crops and fishery products with damage estimated at 57.9 million pesos (USD 1.15 million). Widespread flashfloods killed at least five people and displaced an additional 4,804 families (17,026 individuals) from the 25 *barangays* hardest hit by the catastrophe. These conditions greatly increased the need for more stable resettlement sites (Rebollos, 2014).

## The Intervention

Due to logistical limitations, and despite continuous assistance from concerned government agencies and domestic and international humanitarian donors, most of the refugees, especially the poorest and the most marginalized, still resided in these temporary shelters more than a year after the stand-off had been declared under control. While the makeshift shelters provided temporary relief and a certain degree of security for the refugees at the height of the conflict, social and economic conditions had deteriorated to deplorable

levels over time. Thus, while the city still was fighting the rebels, the city government of Zamboanga started training its sights on recovery and rehabilitation.

The task of reconstructing homes and rebuilding the communities remained a Herculean challenge for the local and national governments and their partners. Partner agencies and humanitarian groups, along with technical assistance from the University of the Philippines - Planades, quickly responded to the challenge and the city government came up with the Zamboanga City Roadmap to Recovery and Reconstruction Plan (Z3R Plan). Its aim was to provide a long term and durable solution for the city's displaced population. In accordance with the principle of 'Build Back Better' to build resilient communities with a better environment, the Plan sought to restore and improve facilities, livelihood and living conditions of the affected communities.

The Z3R Plan was funded by the national government and has the following components (SONA Technical Report 2014):

- Shelter Assistance: 1.39 billion pesos (USD 31.6 million);
- Land acquisition for housing sites and right-of-way for road/drainage: 258.2 million pesos (USD 5.9 million);
- Land development covering road and drainage, housing site development, fishpond fencing, flood gates, and mangrove reforestation: 648.9 million pesos (USD 14.7 million);
- Security covering land acquisition, land development, and construction: 143.7 million pesos (USD 3.3 million);
- Rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure, assistance to small and medium enterprises, agriculture, and cultural resources: 821.0 million pesos (USD 18.7 million);
- Other assistance to 5,587 families: 55.9 million pesos (USD 1.3 million);
- Contingency: 184.1 million pesos (USD 4.2 million).

Temporary shelters or bunkhouses were constructed in eight areas. The City Government, in coordination with the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and the National Housing Authority (NHA) identified areas for resettlement of the displaced persons. At the same time, areas for permanent shelters were identified and prepared in accordance with the Z3R Plan.

#### *The Sama–Badjao Refugees*

The Badjaos, or Sama Dilaut, people posed a particular challenge during the rehabilitation and reconstruction. For centuries, the Badjaos have lived on the fringes of mainstream Filipino society. Widely known as the "Sea Gypsies" of the Sulu and Celebes Seas, the Badjaos are scattered along the coastal areas of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Basilan, and some municipalities of the Zamboanga provinces and in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Sizeable communities can even be found in areas of Eastern Malaysia.

The Badjaos are known as Sama Laus (Sea Sama) amongst themselves and spend virtually their entire lives on houseboats. They subsist mostly on seaweed gathering and fishing. They are noted deep-sea divers and navigators. They only come ashore to barter their

harvests for farmed produce such as fruits and cassava, as well as to make repairs to their houseboats.

The Badjaos are firm believers in divine intervention. Sick people usually seek the advice of the *tawal* (spirit doctor) and *ombol* (offering to old spirits) before they are referred to modern health facilities and hospitals for treatment and management. The concept of life and their relationship to the sea is integrated into their cultural rituals. For example, as a childbirth ritual a newborn infant is thrown into the sea and members of the clan dive to save the newborn (Peralta, 2002). Badjaos are almost always the boat people who dive for coins from wharves and near passing sea vessels in the area.

The Badjaos also have a unique preference for food in comparison to other displaced groups in Zamboanga. Instead of consuming the rice, noodles and canned goods that were packed and distributed during relief operations, they sold these goods in exchange for cassava and fish that are their staple foods. Cassava, which they locally call *pangghih*, is their primary source of sustenance. It is usually boiled and mashed into *pyuto* or toasted with coconut milk for *sian-lag*.

Their unique culture, customs and traditions, ancestral worship and other practices are largely misunderstood despite a rich and centuries-old heritage and their gentle and peace-loving nature. They are looked down on by other dominant tribes, such as the Tausogs, and often are referred to as *luwa'an* or "outcasts." Despite being a shy and reclusive people, the Tausug see the Badjao as stubborn, hard-headed and always fighting with one another. On the other hand, the Badjaos fear the Tausug because they are "fierce" (Sinama.org 2012).

The lack of understanding by other ethnic groups has caused them to maintain very little contact with the general population. In turn separation from mainstream society prevented their access to basic health services, education and formal occupations. The Badjaos, therefore, are among the most oppressed and marginalized indigenous peoples of southern Philippines.

The Badjaos of Zamboanga live in a closely-knit community called "Hong Kong" in Barangay Rio Hondo. They at first refused to leave their homes at the height of the Zamboanga Siege. When it became apparent that their community was no longer safe due to heavy fighting, they were forced to evacuate to safer areas. The Badjaos paddled their way towards the shoreline of Cawa-Cawa Boulevard, some four kilometers away, in their small houseboats. The whole community eventually made camp in this area, refusing to join the majority of evacuees inside the Joaquin Enriquez Memorial Sports Complex, (Jazul, 2014) since the Tausogs as well as the Christian population were slowly populating the complex. The report of ZABIDA, the Zamboanga Basilan Integrated Development Alliance, research team, entitled *Resilience Amidst Crisis in Zamboanga City: Narratives on Internally Displaced Communities*, captured this inter-tribal conflict (Rebollos 2014). As expressed by some IDP respondents, it was one of the lessons learned from the siege. One Badjao IDP informant declared:

*We kept on running and eventually reached the Sports Complex. But we decided to stay in the Boulevard because...you know. They did not treat us like human beings. They treated us differently, the people in the Complex...the ones who came in first to settle at the Complex. (Takbo kami nangtakbo, hanggang*

*makarating sa Grandstand. Pero iniisip naming tumira sa Boulevard dahil sa...alam mo na. Hindi nila tinitignan kami bilang tao. Iba ang pagtingin nila sa amin, yung mga tao sa Grandstand. Yung mga nauna sa Grandstand.)*

Although living in relative peace away from their perceived oppressors, separation from their traditional homes eventually turned the once scenic spot into a squalid evacuation site. Poor sanitation eventually led to a health concern. The squalor provided a window into the ravages of the Siege and became one of the primary concerns of the city. It became apparent that relocating the Badjaos to more permanent relocation sites was imperative.

Figure 1. Makeshift shelters of the Badjaos at Justice R.T. Lim Boulevard



#### *The Buggoc Challenge: A Bayanihan Build*

Prior to the siege, Barangay Mariki, a community built on stilts in a mangrove area, was the biggest concentration of Badjao families in Zamboanga City. Although some had tried to assimilate with mainstream society in recent years, a large majority still opted to locate in enclaves such as Mariki.

During the conflict, however, all houses in this community were razed to the ground. In culturally sensitive areas, resettling a particular population affected by any calamity can touch sensitivities and raise serious social questions. Careful consideration had to be given in relocating a particular ethnic group into temporary shelters.

With the government's decreasing resources and the growing reliance on local and international organizations, it soon became evident that donor fatigue would set in, leaving the affected individuals to fend for themselves. Ultimately, government and the humanitarian partners could not be solely responsible for the city's return to normalcy.

Then Recovery Cluster Head Dr. Jane C. Bascar, recognizing that the city's rehabilitation and reconstruction rests on every *Zamboangueño*, whether directly affected by the crisis or not, conceptualized the Buggoc Bayanihan Challenge – a *Community Build* exclusively for the Badjaos. This relied heavily on the indomitable *Bayanihan* (community) spirit of the *Zamboangueños*. Its main objective was the creation of a new water village for the Badjaos by means of a public-private partnership.

The plan rallied individuals, as well as public and private partners, to help raise funds to build 200 culturally-sensitive, single, detached units on stilts for the Badjaos - in the shortest time possible. It had the specific objectives of identifying and preparing the

relocation site for the returning 200 Badjao families sheltered at R. T. Lim Boulevard; identify and engage non-governmental players to provide manual labor, moral and financial support in the construction of semi-permanent shelters for the target recipients; building single, detached houses in the shortest time possible, bearing in mind the cultural sensitivity of the target beneficiaries; relocating the *Badjaos* with minimal social or cultural disruption; providing for post-transfer support such as social, medical and livelihood generation capacities; and, serving as a possible model for replication in other relocation sites.

The site chosen for the *Community Build* was Sitio Buggoc – an area located on a vast swampland adjoining the sea and very near the Badjaos' place of origin. The primary factor in this choice was its easy access to the Badjao's traditional means of livelihood. The site also adhered to the government's "no return" policy and addressed security, long term environmental preservation and development. By containing the Badjaos in a homogenous community, intrusions by other ethnic minorities would be minimized, allowing the Badjaos to live in relative peace according to their customary ways. This was seen as an initial step towards dignified living and the attainment of lasting peace.

The *Build* was significant in that it raised the level of awareness and concern among city residents of the plight of the Badjao refugees. It also presented the whole city with an opportunity to work collectively, using limited material and human resources to respond to the cries of the affected through broad support under a uniquely Filipino *bayanihan* (community) spirit – the spirit of cooperation and pooling in resources to help one another. Finally, the *Build* offered a healing process for all concerned, especially since the Siege rekindled or deepened age-old cultural or religious rifts, reviving Muslim – Non Muslim differences. Direct victims and others had a chance with the *Build* to work together towards a slow reconciliation and healing with the hope of achieving unity in diversity as they faced a common adversity.

In the face of uncertainty about the government's ability to address the issues, the proposal for the Community Build was presented to Mr. Brian Lustre, Head of the Zamboanga Office of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to obtain the much needed support for the project's implementation. To jump-start the *Build*, the IOM sponsored a pre-construction forum that was coordinated by the city government to acquaint the partners and builders with the time frame, design and construction methods to be used. At the same time, Badjao refugees were invited to be part of the planning and were tapped to work during the construction phase. An important goal was to inculcate in them a sense of ownership and to remove the impression that the project was just another dole-out.

Under this public-private partnership project, the IOM provided the technical assistance and housing materials while the partners were asked to provide the labor component amounting to 10,000 pesos (USD 227) per housing unit. Post transfer support, such as social and health services, water and sanitation were also included in the plan to help address basic needs and to ensure more dignified living conditions for the Badjaos.

In October 2014 City Mayor Ma. Isabelle Climaco, with the full support of the City Council, finally broke ground, paving the way for the Buggoc Challenge.

Figure 2. Buggoc Transitional Site and the Paniran Housing Project for Internally Displaced Families



## The Outcomes

Today, thanks to the public-private partnership, 201 families (183 owner families and 18 sharers), predominantly coming from the Sama Dilaut tribe, are now sheltered in the 200 single-detached housing units of the water village at the Buggoc Transitional Site. Twenty-eight (28) private individual and organizational donors joined the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the local government in donating a total of 1,110,000 pesos (USD 25,227) to build these 200 houses on stilts.

Table 1: Outcome Data

Particulars	Department of Social Welfare and Development	Private & Government Partners	Totals
No. of Houses Built	75	125	200
Total Amount (Labor Cost only)	PHP 787,500 (USD 17,898)	PHP 1,110,000 (USD 25,227)	PHP 1,897,500 (USD 43,125)
No. of Families Transferred			183 owner families and 18 sharers
No. of Individuals			1,192

Source: International Organization for Migration internal document

The report of the *Build* shows that housing materials were provided by the IOM – Canada Fund. Local private donors provided funding for labor costs for 111 houses and the Department of Social and Welfare Development for 89. Boardwalks provided access to the



houses since the houses were built on stilts over a marshland. Part of the construction materials and labor costs for these were funded by the Department of Social and Welfare Development, while the city government, together with the IOM, provided the remainder. The Rotary Club of Zamboanga North also pitched in to complete the 210-meter passageway.

The employment of 1,025 workers under a cash-for-work arrangement was an additional benefit of the *Build*. Many of the workers were *Badjao* refugees. Their sweat equity gave them not only a sense of ownership of their community but also an additional source of income for their families.

Aside from providing the *Badjaos* with a more dignified and secure habitat, the project gave them access to better government services. Health conditions of the relocated *Badjaos* greatly improved. Sanitation problems were addressed with better toilets and a sewage system. Two-hundred communal kitchen areas, five water bladders at five water points, 37 permanent and 4 temporary toilets, 24 bathing cubicles, and a child friendly space all contributed to better sanitation, waste management and disposal (City of Zamboanga 2014). The infrastructure also has opened the eyes of the *Badjaos* to the need of preserving the environment for their *own* benefit.

The camp manager and social worker for the *Badjaos* reported that families now enjoy living conditions much better than their makeshift tents at Cawa-Cawa Boulevard during the emergency phase of the crisis. Some of the families remarked that the new shelters in Buggoc were better than their original homes before the siege.

The Buggoc site is better organized than the congested “Hong-Kong” community where most of *Badjao* families originally lived. There is more space between houses and sturdier boardwalks. Despite the preference of some to return to their places of origin, many already expressed contentment with their current situation in Buggoc. Because the area is adjacent to the sea, the *Badjaos* are now able to go back to their main source of income, which is fishing. Some are now engaged selling their catch at the public market.

Many of them also gained a sense of security in Buggoc. Aside from the presence of a Philippine Marines detachment in the area, a security component seen as necessary after the Siege, Camp Management, headed by the City Social Welfare and Development Office and some personnel from the Department of Social Welfare and Development, also identified community leaders and peacemakers within the community to help maintain internal peace and order among the *Badjao* families.

In the light of these developments, the President of the Philippine Council for Sama and *Badjau*, Datu Hadji Hussayin Arpa, has expressed gratitude to all the partners and most especially to the International Organization for Migration and the local government for looking after the welfare of the *Badjao*, whose only means of living is through the sea.

The Buggoc *Build* showed that multi-sectoral collaboration works, especially in the context of building communities. It was an opportunity for stakeholders to realize that rebuilding communities and helping displaced populations after a disaster are not the sole duty of government but everyone’s shared responsibility. In a multicultural environment, inter-ethnic understanding and social cohesion are crucial components for peace and development. These can be creatively and concretely achieved through collaborative development projects as a form of healing, trust and confidence building among various groups. Participants in these projects gain a greater sense of community and are given a real

opportunity to conduct a dialogue and to better understand each other while assisting and addressing the needs of the project beneficiaries.

As recipients of the project, the Badjaos slowly but significantly have become an empowered people. The project is an affirmation that the rights of indigenous peoples are equal to those of all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to both be different and to be respected for those differences. Moving towards organizing themselves as a community will pave the way for social and cultural enhancement in order to bring an end to all forms of discrimination and marginalization.

The Buggoc *Build* also was a challenge for policymakers. The Philippines has a law, the National Building Code that does not allow any structure to be constructed or established within four meters of bodies of water in urban areas. This case calls for a review of policies using a cultural lens. The question to be addressed is how to strike a balance between the tenets of the National Building Code and the cultural traditions and way of life of ethnic groups and indigenous peoples whose cultures are attached to the sea and other bodies of water such as rivers and lakes.

#### *Zamboanga City Moving Forward*

The government committed itself to assisting all people affected by the armed conflict in Zamboanga and to make the City a better home for all *Zamboangeños* regardless of their ethnic origin or religious affiliation. In line with this, the government has formulated a 3.89 billion pesos (USD 88.4 million) early recovery and rehabilitation plan that covers the redevelopment of the City, particularly the affected communities. The Department of Public Works and Highways and the Department of Social Welfare and Development are closely coordinating with other national government agencies, Zamboanga City, international organizations, and civil society organizations for the completion and continued success of the rehabilitation plan.

The events that unfolded in Zamboanga City in 2013 were truly heartbreaking and devastating. Homes were destroyed, lives were lost and disrupted and dreams were broken. Zamboanga City, though, remains undaunted and undefeated. Today, the 200 Badjaos families live in a community in relative peace and comfort very close to what they consider their traditional home – the sea. Their present relocation site has allowed them to continue their traditional forms of sustenance - marginal fishing, seaweed farming, and shell collection. Buggoc has become a showcase for peace and unity despite tribal diversity. It shows that distinct cultures may co-exist and thrive separately when they are willing to unite and work together towards one future.

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