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WCIRAC's Integrated Intervention Approach Has Led to Sustainable Communities

Communities in Salay, Misamis Oriental, Philippines

Background

The height of armed conflict and accompanying intense militarization in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought about massive displacements of thousands of rural families in the Philippines. The internal refugees were in dire need of help from hopelessness, hunger, disease and violations of their persons. Women and children suffered much and were the most vulnerable victims.

The Women and Children Internal Refugees Assistance Center, Inc. (WCIRAC) took up the challenges of working for these victims of armed conflict. It started as a relief program in 1989 that provided temporary shelter for women and children internal refugees. With the cooperation and support of international and local partners, it was able to provide more assistance on psychosocial services, alternative income-generating projects and supplemental feeding.

The Program

In 1992, WCIRAC established outreach teams to be able to provide immediate and direct assistance to cases of thousands of displaced families in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. From 1993 to 1996, with the cooperation and support of international and local partners, it was able to provide more assistance on the level of relief. Its relief assistance consisted of supplemental feeding, psychosocial/stress relief management with children's playgroup activities, and limited livelihood assistance. Assistance was given or extended to several communities through missions organized together with the network of NGOs involved in providing assistance to victims of human rights violations and through the community-approach of its area outreach teams. Assistance was more sustained and implemented in the integrated manner designed by WCIRAC through the community-approach of the area outreach program.

In 1996, WCIRAC came up with the conclusions that its relief work had to be extended into improving the economic condition of the specific internal communities it worked with. The situation of the women and children internal refugee beneficiaries has since then changed as they have been resettled or returned to their barangays. Harsh economic and social difficulties in rebuilding their lives after being displaced threatened the sustainability of the improvements made in the nutrition of children and mothers, the psychosocial conditions of women, and the sense of control over their lives sensed by these internal refugees. This was underscored by the absence of other NGOs and the grave inadequacy of government support in the specific areas of WCIRAC's area outreach program.

During this time, the issue of food security, especially in developing countries, was already being taken up by partners abroad. It was then that WCIRAC started to provide and look for funding assistance to support the economic improvement related continuity of its assistance program.

In 1997, WCIRAC, piloted six communities for this kind of rehabilitative assistance. Three communities in Ilo-ilo in the Visayas Region, and three in Misamis Oriental in the Mindanao Region.

The communities belong to the category of farming barangays which have backward farming methods, insufficient capital resources and receives minimal support, if ever there is any, from the government. This is aggravated by the land ownership pattern wherein ownership of a few obliges many farmers to work on these farms under very exploitative conditions. As such, productivity and income is generally very low. The areas in Mindanao belong to the town classification of 5th class, while the barangays in Iloilo belong to the town classification of 4th class.

Generally, the barangays in Mindanao fair more poorly than the Visayas areas. The formerly displaced communities here produce root crops as their main staple food. Corn is the most available grain which can only be had through buying and is prepared mainly for the tender aged members of the family who cannot digest well the root crops. Vegetable are nil and hardly become part of the daily meals of families. Seafoods are much harder for them to avail with salt as the only regular source of iodine. This is evidenced by the high incidence of goiter with most women having the problem.

The steep mountain trails and undeveloped roads in these barangays make it doubly hard for the people to sell whatever farm produce they have in the town or bring products from the town. The only form of transportation are farm animals.

The majority of the women and children belong to families that cultivate small plots of the public lands. Private landowners are few and own land much of the arable lands which are mostly planted with permanent crops such as coffee and fruit trees.

In the past few years since WCIRAC undertook its integrated relief intervention program with women in these areas, the small-scale relief economic assistance for their communal farming and small sari-sari store cooperative that had been provided to them have flourished.

The communities in San Joaquin, Iloilo fair better. Farm products are much more varied. Farming methods are much developed, with some irrigation system, agricultural inputs and use of inter-cropping. Hence, productivity and food supply is better.

However, food is still insufficient and malnutrition is high, especially among children and mothers. One major reason is that the 90% of the population who are tilling 200 hectares of farm land owned by one family have to pay rent from their grain income. With the lower grain income the families actually get, they generally lack capital resources for the needed inputs and are forced to enter into usurious lending agreements. The communal irrigation system has been eroded by floods. And the smaller number of families who are owner-cultivator have less developed land with no irrigation system.

Generally, it is the women in these communities face the problem of not having enough food supply to cook for their families and feed the children. The Mindanao women communities are worse and have a higher infant mortality than the Visayas.

The women have been actively involved in the conceptualization of the project from the stage of defining the problem and the objectives until the actual workshops for the identification of the specific economic projects.

Because of their direct participation in the workshops, the projects that women were most interested in and willing to implement were identified. The process also showed them the need for cooperation and the need to consider their local resources and capabilities as women in choosing their projects.

This developed program on Food Security aims to increase income and food production of the direct and indirect beneficiaries that would ensure enough food supply based on the nutritional requirements defined by the Department of Health, and in the process strengthen the cooperation and improve the well-being of women and children.

As this program was developed, WCIRAC, did not focus and end up merely on organizing and establishing economic projects for the women and their families (referred to as indirect beneficiaries). As its main program strategy, the Integrated Intervention Approach had been applied to. Program components of Community Health and Nutrition, skills development and other capability building activities, and gender sensitivity are with the program.

The program in these pilot areas, generally, was able to help in providing a concrete solution to the problem of poverty and malnutrition. However, these changes in the economic situation had an impact on existing structures and material conditions that had spelled out conflicts and damages that had been addressed.

The Food Security projects assistance contributed to the over-all goal of the program, which is women empowerment. It made them active in improving their own economic situation and that of their families and communities. Although the percentage of income increases varies from one community to another, the program has already observed in one area a 109 % increase in their income while the others average from 15% to 30%, in the case of Iloilo.

These improvements were made possible by the actual increase in the women's contribution to the family income, improvement in their economic skills, and a stronger sense of cooperation and social awareness. At the same time, the improvement of family nutrition will work favorably for the general well-being of the children as their nutritional needs for healthy growth and development are ensured. In Iloilo, the feeding of children was sustained by the produce of their communal gardens.

However, some problems had to be confronted to manage negative effects that were anticipated before the program implementation. For one, the women-oriented projects posed challenges to the existing and generally accepted subordinate status of women in their families and communities and caused conflicts with their husbands. Since it was anticipated, among the capability-building activities, education and training on Gender sensitivity and other women issues and rights were launched and given emphasis. The impact was strongest on the men who took up this education. Eventually, they became very supportive to their wives and women in the community.

Another problem was that improvement in the situation of the beneficiaries also created divisions among the people since neighboring communities or families who did not benefit from the projects could become envious. Local officials and landowners also became their enemies, since these officials are owners of the big lands.

These issues underlined the importance of education and training and of organizing the needs aspects of the intervention program. Another method and approach that contributed to the development of assertion among the women and the community was the Participatory Resources Appraisal, where everybody in the community participated including the youth. Human and local resources appraisals, needs assessment and participation of the beneficiaries in decisions were steps undertaken in the success of the projects and the program. In this process they also discovered what assistance they should be getting from the government assistance program.

Technical training for specific skills needed for each particular project in the preparatory and implementation stages were ensured. Additional education and training on Management and Leadership and Bookkeeping were given to provide the needed elementary knowledge on the science of managing and supervising finances. The organizational activity of holding regular assessment and evaluation made way to see their actual development and performance. For the women, participation on the local governance is among their main thrust in their organization. Access of resources is also one.

Different experiences

WCIRAC had different experiences in the communities in Salay: Barangays of Alipuaton, Ili-ilihon and Tinagaan, because they had different particularities. The war was on and off, or there was the continuing threat of war and displacements. Even in the choices of economic projects had to be adjusted. Basically, they rely on farming, but there is always the risk, not to mention the natural calamities, especially when the harvest is nearing. Militarization always coincide with the harvest time. The people were accused of supporting the insurgents present in the area. But on the other hand, it was so sad to think also, that some groups rival to another group among the insurgents accused the people of being individualist and economists thus these small projects' produce were intently being stolen. Although there are also these unfriendly communities nearby that stole their produce. Credit Assistance where they can make their own choices of small income-generating was established.

In spite of all the stress and difficulties the women and the community experienced, they are still there defending their organization and projects. Invited by the military or the leaders of the insurgents for dialogues is no longer as stressful for them as it used to be. Strong coping mechanisms were developed among the communities. Knowing their rights and equipped with different skills made them better able to survive. The program in these communities were concluded in year 2000. WCIRAC still monitors the communities a regular basis.

Conclusion

At present, WCIRAC provides assistance for more sustainable improvement on conditions of the families and communities of its women and children beneficiaries and the whole of the community.

The propagation of organic farming was an outstanding gain. People appreciated its health hazard free effects. Community, people, the women and children active participation are stepping stones to rebuilding their communities from the ravage of war and to empowerment.

Again, “there is no piecemeal stress, as there should be no piecemeal assistance”. Focusing on a single aspect of a community of former displaced internal refugees’ condition is providing only a half of a lifeline. Thus, WCIRAC tried to provide “total care” (biopsychoeconomic needs) for the women and children and the community whom it served through its **integrated intervention approach** and ample time. WCIRAC believes that no amount of rehabilitation is enough unless war is stopped.