

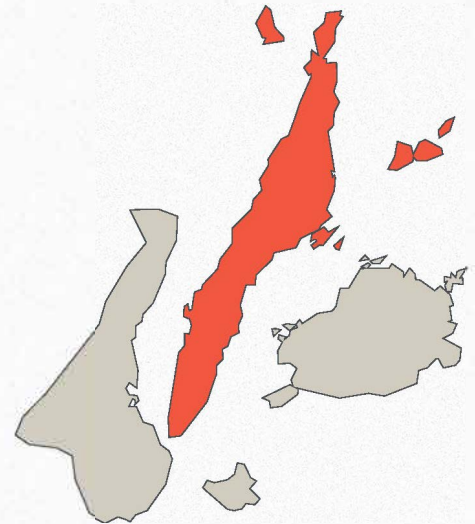
Strengthening Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms through Children and Youth Participation in Cebu

Child and youth participation contributes to children and youth's personal growth and development, strengthening civil society and governance, and leads to the achievement of better outcomes for children and youth. Despite this, they remain marginalized, with mostly low levels of participation about decisions and programs that affect their lives. In the midst of an adult-centric society, they are treated merely as passive recipients of both development and humanitarian interventions, have limited space to claim and exercise their rights to information, communication, association and civic engagement, including in child protection systems and mechanisms.

The implementation of the project, Child Protection Support to Children and Families affected by Typhoon Rai, had taken the steps to help address some of these gaps by actively involving children and youth volunteers in the implementation of project interventions, thereby opening the potential for strengthened community-based child protection mechanisms where children are most vulnerable and at-risk, particularly in times of disasters and emergency situations.

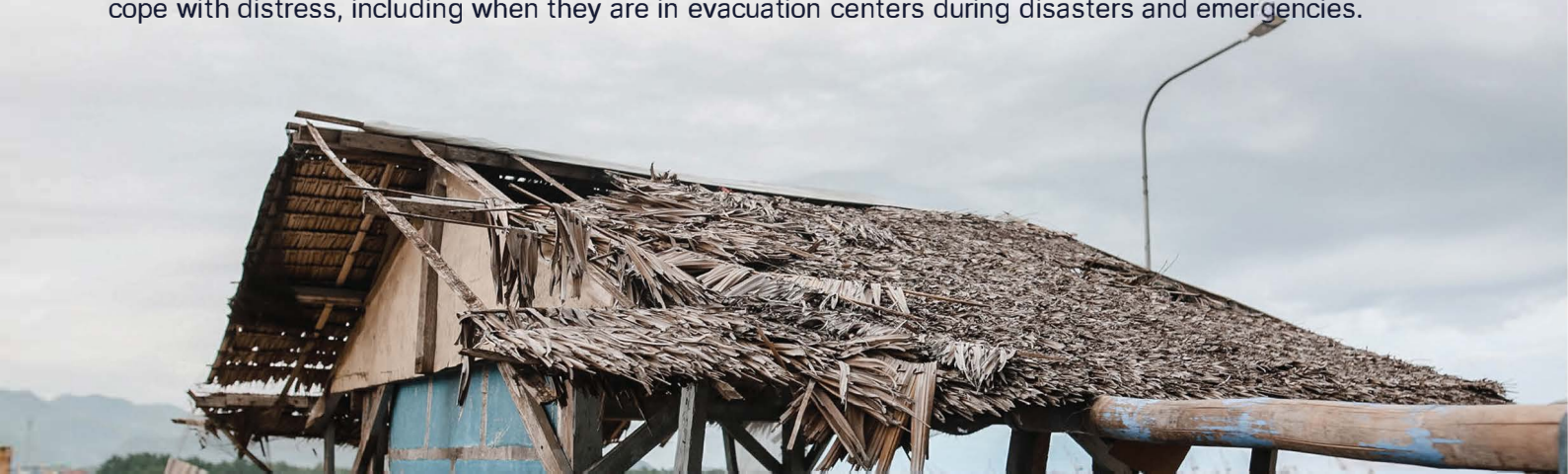
The project was implemented by Terre des Hommes Netherlands in the Philippines (TdH NL) from April to December 2022 through its local implementing partners, Bidlisiw Foundation, Inc. and Center for Empowerment and Development of People's Organizations in Eastern Visayas (CoPE) with the goal of ensuring that children in disaster-affected and disaster-prone areas in Cebu Province and Borongan

City, Eastern Samar are protected from child abuse and exploitation. One of its key interventions is the conduct of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) sessions in the covered barangays involving children in age groups 6 to 12 years and 13 to 17 years old. In the conduct of the activities, both Bidlisiw Foundation and CoPE enjoined children and youth volunteers to serve as facilitators during the sessions. They were also consulted on the design of the MHPSS sessions and gave inputs on the content of the MHPSS kits, particularly in Cebu. Through this intervention and approach, the project enabled peer-to-peer support through which children in disaster-affected and at-risk areas learned about children's rights, child protection issues, case referral systems, and exercises and strategies that children can do to help cope with distress, including when they are in evacuation centers during disasters and emergencies.



“ I know there are those who may have experienced worse. But seeing how happy and cheerful the kids were after the activity fascinated and inspired me. The experience helped me with my own healing.”

-PSG Member and MHPSS Facilitator, Cebu City, Philippines



The MHPSS sessions had been impactful not only among the child participants, but even more so for the youth facilitators. For most of them, it was a learning experience which opened their eyes to the different experiences and capacities of children amidst crises such as Super Typhoon Rai, and the COVID-19 pandemic, among others. They acquired new knowledge, and skills that contributed to their personal growth and development, which further bolster their motivation to become more active youth volunteers and advocates in their communities, potentially, beyond the project.

Two youth volunteers tapped by Bidlisiw Foundation to be part of the MHPSS facilitators shared that the MHPSS sessions opened their eyes to the different types of children, including children with disabilities. Reflecting on the level of resilience they saw among the children, and the positive impact of the activity to the children, one of the youth volunteers shared that it helped her in her own healing since her house was also destroyed by Super Typhoon Rai.

Both youth volunteers are officers of the school-based Peer Support Group (PSG) that Bidlisiw Foundation helped organize and train in a secondary school in Cebu City. Prior to the project, these two youth volunteers, together with other PSG members, are already involved in facilitating awareness raising sessions on children's rights and child protection in their school and communities through Bidlisiw Foundation.

Apart from Cebu City, Bidlisiw Foundation also tapped other youth volunteers in the municipality of Argao for the project. It engaged the group of Child Rights Advocates (CRAs) organized by the Children's Legal Bureau (CLB) in 2019 across 10 barangays in Argao, Cebu. One of the CRAs shared that during the project implementation, she did not only co-facilitate the MHPSS sessions, but was also assigned as the focal person in other activities such as the identification of potential beneficiaries for the shelter assistance, mobilization of child participants during the MHPSS sessions, and monitoring work, among others.

“This experience is very different from my experience with CLB, where I was mostly a participant. As a focal person of the project, I developed better communication skills, especially in dealing with people older than me (parents and guardians of child participants of MHPSS). I also learned better time management and became more resourceful as I needed to work within deadlines.

As a youth leader, I also became more resilient and responsible despite some challenges along the way.”

-Child Rights Advocate, Argao, Cebu, Philippines

By capitalizing on existing capacities of young people and their organizations, the project not only augmented its human resources, but also enabled youth participation through recognition of young people as citizens who have the potential to contribute to society, increasing children's access to information about things that concern them through peer-to-peer education and support, enabling young people to express themselves and be heard through consultations and feedbacking sessions, and be provided with opportunity for youth-led actions.



This presents a wide opportunity for greater civic engagement of these youth volunteers and their organizations, especially in sustaining community-based efforts in child protection. The youth volunteers and CRAs believe that young people like them have a big role to play in child protection, particularly in awareness raising on children's rights and child protection. With the new knowledge and skills they gained from the project, their potential is even bigger.

One of the youth volunteers added that she wants to continue being part of awareness raising efforts because she wants to help in developing more children and young people who are confident in themselves.

This was supported by a CRA member from Argao who shared that even though there's only a few who truly acknowledge their contribution in the community, her experience shows that young people have a lot to contribute, not only within their families, but in the larger community.

“Being able to help children through the MHPSS sessions, seeing the smiles on their faces and knowing how grateful they were, motivates me to continue being an active youth. I believe that our role is important in raising awareness on children's rights among their peers, so that they will not experience abuse or exploitation.”

-PSG Member and MHPSS Facilitator, Cebu City, Philippines

“At first, I thought I can share my learnings (about children's rights and child protection) to my family members at least. But later, after more trainings and community involvement like this (the MHPSS), I realized that it's not just my family who deserves to know. We can make a difference. We have the capacity and potential to influence our peers to learn about their rights, their responsibilities, and become part of children and youth groups.”

- MHPSS Co-facilitator and CRA, Argao, Cebu, Philippines

As leaders of their organizations, the youth advocates recognize the challenge of recruiting more members and training the next line of leaders. As such, in order to sustain the previous gains, and in order for these groups of young people to realize their full potential to having more active role in child protection in schools and communities, broader support is necessary to enable more children and youth, especially those who are more at-risk, such as those with disabilities and children with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) among others, to have the same opportunities to participate in community-based and child-centered activities. More systematic efforts must be taken by governments, civil society, and other relevant institutions to sustain and implement efforts that uphold children and youth participation as a crucial element of community-based child protection systems and provide concrete opportunities for children and young people to have full and meaningful participation in child protection programming and decision-making processes.

