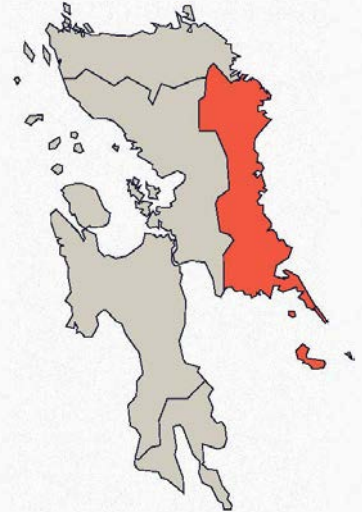


Institutionalizing Community-based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services to Strengthen Child Protection in Emergencies in Borongan City

Borongan City and its vulnerabilities

Borongan City, the capital and sole city of Eastern Samar Province, lies along the Philippine Eastern Seaboard making it high-risk to hydrometeorological hazards such as typhoons, storm surges, and landslides.¹ The perennial occurrence of these hazards, which have the potential to become destructive disasters, is a constant threat to the livelihoods, properties, and lives of the city populace. The adverse impacts of these life-threatening events do not only cause physical and material losses but also bring harmful consequences to the mental health and wellbeing of affected families and individuals. Along with natural hazard-induced disasters, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the burden of the people, making their already difficult situation worse, especially those who belong to poverty-stricken families. The compounding effects of these disasters and pandemic did not only result in difficulties addressing the survival needs of the families but also led to an increase in protection-related issues concerning children, youth, and women as evidenced by the available reports of the City Social Welfare and Development Office (CSWDO) and the Philippine National Police- Women and Children Protection Desk (PNP-WCPD). Cases of sexual abuse such as incest, physical and psychological abuse, as well as prostitution have escalated jeopardizing the safety and welfare of children and youth in the city.



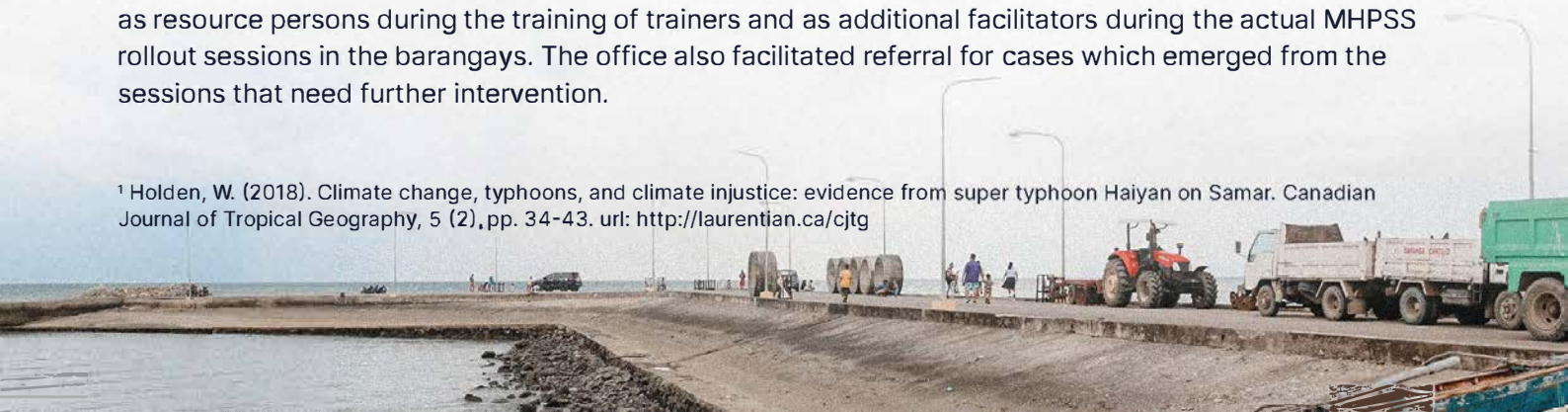
TdH NL, CoPE, and the the Local Government as enablers of a safe environment and sound mental health for children

The evident rise in the reported cases of child abuse and exploitation amid the pandemic and aftermath of Super Typhoon Rai in 2021 paved the way for Terre des Hommes Netherlands in the Philippines (TdH NL), in partnership with the City Government of Borongan and the Center for Empowerment and Development of People's Organizations in Eastern Visayas (CoPE), to work towards building a safer and just world where children can realize their rights. Driven by the same goal of keeping children out of harm's way during emergencies and peace time, TdH NL, the city government, and CoPE were able to implement interventions focusing on child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) through a project titled "Child Protection Support to Children and Families Affected by Super Typhoon Rai". The City Government, through the CSWDO, provided technical support by serving as resource persons during the training of trainers and as additional facilitators during the actual MHPSS rollout sessions in the barangays. The office also facilitated referral for cases which emerged from the sessions that need further intervention.

The CSWDO and CoPE have the same goals and purpose. We have the same clientele. That's why we need and complement each other."

- Government Representative, Borongan City, Philippines

¹ Holden, W. (2018). Climate change, typhoons, and climate injustice: evidence from super typhoon Haiyan on Samar. Canadian Journal of Tropical Geography, 5 (2), pp. 34-43. url: <http://laurentian.ca/cjtg>



The creation of the Project Advisory and Management Team composed of different city government departments and agencies (e.g., CSWDO, PNP-WCPD, City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office, City Mayor, and Department of Education), CSOs, barangay chairpersons, and representatives from sectoral organizations also played a vital role in the successful implementation of the eight-month project.

Further, other actors from the communities such as children, youth, mothers, and fathers were also significantly involved in the project and were equipped to become advocates of MHPSS at the barangay level through training, workshops, and actual conduct of MHPSS sessions. These actors have played a fundamental role in strengthening community-based child protection and MHPSS in the city.

Policy changes and capacity building as mechanisms for institutionalizing MHPSS

Given the increase in mental-health related concerns and its worrisome impact during the pandemic, the city endeavored to promote the institutionalization of mental health programs. It is not just about ensuring people's physical health, but it is also important to prioritize their mental health. That's why the CSWDO was tasked to push for the realization of this, and it was timely that the project targeted the city for its MHPSS interventions."

- CoPE Representative, Philippines

Through the capacity building and awareness raising efforts of CoPE, the project provided a venue for the people of Borongan City to appreciate the importance of mental health. With the local government's limited knowledge on mental health prior to the project, CoPE was able to influence its planning and programming processes through its staunch advocacy work during the project implementation. It was also an advantage that CoPE participated in the formulation of the City Executive and Legislative Agenda for the next three years and became a member of the City Council for the Protection of Children. These have contributed to creating an enabling environment for developing policies that are crucial for institutionalizing mental health services and child protection. Such institutionalization is vital for ensuring the allocation of funds and resources to sustain mental-health related programs regardless of change in political leadership. One of the enacted policies during

the project implementation is City Ordinance No. 244, which is also known as Borongan Mental Health Program of 2022.

Authored by Hon. Anna Katrina Anacta-Sadac, one of the members of City Legislative Council, City Ordinance No. 244 promotes the shift from a hospital-based approach to a community-based approach for MHPSS which is more proactive and inclusive. Specific interventions to strengthen mental health services at the barangay level are stipulated in the ordinance such as the development of a barangay mental program, equipping of barangay mental health teams, and establishment of barangay mental wellness hubs. These community-based mechanisms are deemed crucial for providing effective and accessible mental health services to the barangays, especially for distressed families, including children, during emergency and non-emergency situations.

"We always see partnership with the local government as the best strategy in program implementation. Good governance in the community or LGU is crucial for the effective delivery of child protection programs. If the governance is problematic, it will affect the delivery of services. Child protection is not just a program, but it involves the systems and structures, the delivery, and the strategies. It involves governance. We want to promote participatory governance."

- CoPE Representative, Philippines



Along with passage of the city ordinance on mental health, the drafting of rights-based policies focusing on children such the amendment of Children's Code and the development of Comprehensive Emergency Plan for Children (CEPC) was also undertaken jointly by the local government and CoPE. Workshops were organized through the project to facilitate the drafting of these policies. At present, both of these proposed policies are still undergoing committee deliberations and hearings. This initiative is a concrete manifestation of the city's commitment to safeguarding children by protecting their rights to survival, protection, and development.

The project also supported the institutionalization of MHPSS services at the barangay level through initiating the development of a Resolution of Acceptance in the 12 covered barangays which formally recognizes the trained 32 children and youth, 28 mothers, and 20 fathers as psychological first aider teams. Given their training on MHPSS, child protection and its related laws, and referral pathway, these teams are envisioned to provide psychosocial support at the barangay level when the need arises, especially during emergencies, along with the Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Committee. Further, they will also be instruments in raising the awareness of their families, neighbors, and peers on MHPSS and child protection. The presence of community-based mechanisms such as these teams also led to better reporting of child protection-related cases in the barangays. Apart from being a source of knowledge, the project also became a venue for the CSWDO to gain the trust of the barangays which enabled openness and better relationships.

Further, the project also influenced the programming and budgeting processes at the barangay level. Barangay leaders who were involved in the project shared that the project enabled them to be more conscious of the needs of children and youth in their respective communities.

“After the project, there were changes in our budgeting. Now, we already allocate a budget for barangay-based institutions, which was not our practice before. We have now secured funds for barangay-based institutions such as the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children, senior citizens, and organization of persons with disabilities.”

- Barangay Local Government Representative, Borongan City, Philippines

“I encourage our youth leaders and the Sangguniang Kabataan to recommend programs and activities that are suitable to their needs, whether these will involve them, their parents, or the whole community. I allow them to have a voice in planning processes. I also tell the youth that they should not be shocked if they will be given responsibilities because this is for their own sake.”

- Barangay Local Government Representative, Borongan City, Philippines

“Now, we can already get information on mental health and child protection issues from our chat group. We are now more able to give attention to these concerns unlike before. The trained barangays are now knowledgeable on what to do, especially how to report the cases. You can see that they trust us. This was not the case before the project.”

- Government Representative, Borongan City, Philippines



Sustained training and awareness raising on MHPSS as a way forward

Albeit the challenges related to schedules and inactive participation of some stakeholders that confronted the project, the gains and accomplishments from the eight-month implementation proved that it was able to effect positive changes that brought a huge impact in the lives of the people. The teamwork, dedication, and support of all concerned individuals and offices played a fundamental role in surpassing the challenges and achieving victory. Building on the gains of the project, stakeholders from the local government and barangays have firmly expressed their desire to continue their efforts to promote and institutionalize MHPSS and child protection.

Both adults and children clamor for the replication and expansion of the project to other barangays and municipalities across Eastern Samar. To achieve this, it is important to sustain the capacity building intervention for the trained facilitators and the conduct of awareness raising campaigns utilizing different platforms to reach a wider audience including families, schools, and persons with disabilities. It is believed that reaching out to a greater population is key to having more force multipliers who will serve as allies in building a safer, resilient, and nurturing society for children and youth, not only in Borongan City, but in the whole province of Eastern Samar.

