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Building peace through building homes in Mindanao

“Peace” is a word that sits uneasily with people living in Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. In the 16th century, the island witnessed the struggles of its minority Moro, or Muslim, population against its Spanish occupiers. And in present day, the armed conflicts between the Filipino government and several rebel groups in southern Mindanao continue, despite the signing of a peace agreement.

Lower Pagangan, in Aleosan town in the province of Cotabato, was one such place where skirmishes between the government and rebels forced thousands of people to flee from their homes. Living in crowded evacuation shelters, they faced the loss of homes and their means of livelihood, as well as lack of education for their children.

Partnerships That Build Community

In 2001, when Habitat for Humanity Philippines embarked on the Peace Build program in Lower Pagangan, the organization's presence brought hope to 200 families who were displaced from their homes.

Together with partner organizations, Habitat unveiled not merely a housing project but also development program that provides infrastructure, training on health, nutrition, livelihood, pre-school education and sustainable agriculture.

HFH Philippines' partners include the United Nations Multi Donor Program, Integral Development Services Inc. (IDS), Cotabato Rural Uplift Movement (CORUM), the local

governments, educational institutions and church groups.

Habitat formed the Aleosan Task Force to assist its Midsayap affiliate in selecting families for the project as well as implementing, monitoring and evaluating the Peace Build program.

To strengthen the Peace Build program, a multi-party peace covenant was signed in August 2001 in Aleosan, Cotabato. The signatories include representatives from the Philippines Armed Forces, Moro National Liberation Front, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, provincial, municipal and barangay (district) government, home partners, church and Muslim leaders. This was witnessed by Habitat and CORUM representatives.

The Peace Build program also features innovations such as the Concrete Interlocking Block (CIB) technology. With this technology, the cost of each house is cut by 31 percent to 55,000 pesos (about US\$980).

Peace Build Program Grows

To date, 100 houses have been built in Aleosan, Cotabato, under the Peace Build program. The success of the Aleosan program prompted another Peace Build site to be established for former rebel fighters and their families in Tupi, South Cotabato.

In recognition of the Peace Build program, the European Commission had granted one million euros (US\$1.2 million) for Habitat to build or renovate homes with 6,000 people in

central and south Mindanao.

Under Peace Build, development of a community takes place after the Habitat houses are constructed. Once a remote area, Tomado, in Aleosan town, lacked electricity, water supply and proper roads. As a Habitat community, it now has an all-weather road and light and power connections, thanks to the local government, which is also installing a water system in the next few months.

Thankful for the blessings received, Patotin Akong, 52, a Muslim leader and Habitat home partner in Lower Pagangan, Aleosan, looks to a brighter future. Referring to the new Habitat community in which he now lives, Akong says: “We hope this new community will slowly erase the bad memory of fear, anger and hatred in children, because if they (children) will forget those pains, then peace will blossom in this land.”



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