Livelihood Support for the Poorest of the Poor in the Philippines

On the island of Samar, some of the most impoverished communities in the Philippines are getting cash grants through an ADB-supported livelihood program to meet their basic needs.

Sixty-four-year-old Guillermo Gamalo, a resident of Balangiga, Barangay San Miguel, Eastern Samar, spends most of his day scrounging for food. He has not been able to work since 2002 when he suffered a stroke and has no pension or any other income to his name. Gamalo occasionally receives food and some money from his siblings, but they have their own families to look after and can only help him sporadically.

As part of a livelihood support program, he is now receiving 260 pesos per day for a period of 30 days. With the money he plans to buy food and the medicine he needs to relieve hypertension, for which he needs to spend 20 pesos per day.

“This is good help for senior citizens who can no longer help themselves,” he says.

Gamalo is one of 28 beneficiaries of this unconditional cash transfer scheme in the barangay. They are all elderly people who can no longer work and have little if no income.

The cash grants are part of an ADB-supported program with a total of $20 million being spent on a series of initiatives to support the livelihood of local communities in Eastern Visayas. Flexibility is given to the local authority to decide how to spend the money depending on the needs of the community, including tools like cash for work and conditional and unconditional cash transfers.

“Beneficiaries are selected based on age, pension income, and support they already receive from family,” says Rosemary Lacbayen, 42, a barangay secretary.

Typically, communities gather to identify priorities and appoint a village committee of 10-20 representatives. The committee identifies who should benefit from the program, ranking people according to their needs. Plan International, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), then steps in to review the ratings and validate the decision.

Plan International is active in 11 municipalities in Leyte and Samar. The livelihood program in Barangay San Miguel started in February 2014.
Widow Rafaela Matula, 82, who also has no income, is another beneficiary from Barangay San Miguel. Occasionally, she gets some money to pray on demand at funerals, which is her only income. On average she attends two funerals per month, where she gets 50-100 pesos, often only food.

“I am grateful for the program,” she says.

She plans to use the money to buy food. Luckily, she is healthy and does not need to take medicines. She hopes that she’ll be able to stretch the cash grant she receives for quite a while.

A bad problem made worse

The island of Samar, in the Philippines’ eastern Visayas region, is one of the poorest in the country. Despite its many natural beauties, Samar is at the fringe of the country’s nascent tourism industry because of its remote location and lack of an international airport.

Local communities, which live off fishing, agriculture, and a woodcraft industry, were hit hard by Typhoon Yolanda in 2013, bringing further misery to an already fragile economy.

“In Samar, Typhoon Yolanda really devastated communities,” explains Diana Baradan, 30, a social worker with Plan International.

In the immediate aftermath of the natural catastrophe, national and international response was swift as emergency aid poured in at a time of grave need.

“After Typhoon Yolanda, the relief pack I was given helped me a lot,” says Gamalo, who used to work in the construction industry.

In the long term, however, local communities went back to struggling with old problems in harsher-than-normal conditions: lack of job opportunities and dependence on remittances from internal and international migrants, all aggravated by the devastation left by Typhoon Yolanda. The livelihood program is bringing much-needed relief to some of the neediest communities in the Philippines.

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