



The Bajao
Sangali District, Zamboanga City

.....

Basic Needs

The Sea: Cradle of Home and Heart

Sophia Alipuddin, 40, is indescribably happy about the housing settlement that 70 Bajao families now occupy in sitio Tungbato, in Sangali district, a 10-minute boat ride off the fish port of Zamboanga City. “It’s different here. We are different here. There seems to be more unity now. We are happy, in our hearts.”

Their new homes, she said, portend other good things to come, including livelihood opportunities that will extricate them from hunger.

Sophia and her husband Roming de los Reyes have six children aged between 1 and 7. Often, the family makes do with just one meal a day.

Roming is a fisherman occasionally finding work as a “baradero” – a labourer on the big fishing vessels that are out to sea for a full month. In this case, his take-home pay totals around PhP600. “Where will PhP600 take us if for the next month the vessel is on dry dock?” Sophia asks.



*The scaffolding and catwalk of Project Hope in barangay Sangali:
the “groundwork” for the Bajao’s community on the sea*

Sophia’s father was also a fisherman. “Before, the fish were everywhere. There were none of those launches yet then,” Sophia recalls. “But now, of course, how many thousands, millions, of people are there in Mindanao?”

Sophia herself sometimes hitches a ride on a cousin’s banca from where, not having the basic hook and line as tools, she must dive for *lato* or seaweeds. “Often that’s all we have for the day.”

Known as sea nomads or sea gypsies, the Bajao, in the past, lived almost entirely on water in their boats. They are acknowledged to be excellent fishermen and banca makers. In adverse weather or whenever threatened by groups encroaching on their territory, the Bajao would let their boathouses simply float.

In the early days, it is said, when an aging Bajao felt useless and a burden to the family, he or she would ask to be left on one of the many islands and sandbars dotting the Celebes Sea to “disappear quietly.”

The Bajao were once a people proud of their ways. From miles, their rituals and weddings performed on the sea could be heard accompanied by the indigenous *tambul* (drums), *kulintangan* (guitar) and *agung* (gongs). The women performed the traditional *igal* dance on the sea, in their boats. Today, however, only a few Bajao families remain living in their boats. They are mostly found in Tawi-Tawi and Sulu at the southern tip of the Philippines. Their boathouses are open prey to the ruthless “saitan” or sea pirates who take not only their catch but also their fishing

The housing settlement in various phases of construction. Some of the beneficiaries contributed labour as counterpart contribution to the project.



Sophia Alipuddin and her brood of six; two of the Bajao elders; and a significant feature of the new culturally sensitive Bajao settlement is that it also provides several public toilets that the households share.

.....





All smiles: Project Hope instills in the beneficiaries newfound pride of place and identity.

equipment and, for the better-off boathouses, their bancas' motors. The terrorist group Abu Sayyaf known to roam the mountains and waters of Basilan, on the other hand, reportedly harass the Bajao for food.

The majority of an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 Bajao population like Sophia and Roming have otherwise been forced onshore where they have set up their stilt houses on the seaside or, in the case of Sangali, the river's mouth. Although safer from the marauding saitan, they are disenfranchised from their life support – the sea.

The Bajao housing settlement in Sangali is a partnership between the Philippine government's Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and

the Zamboanga City government, and CIDA's Philippines-Canada Development Fund in a project called "Project Hope for Bajao Families." (See page 74 for information on the PCDF.) The project includes the construction of core shelters in three sites, barangay Tungbato in Sangali district of Zamboanga City, and barangays Kulaybato and Bato in Lamitan, Basilan province. (The island of Basilan is thirty minutes off Zamboanga City by pump boat.)

Beyond the provision of shelter, Project Hope is a comprehensive development plan of re-integration and re-discovery targeted at building culturally sensitive Bajao communities. The plan takes into account not only the Bajao's need for livelihood opportunities and increased access to basic social services and facilities,



LGU officials during a monitoring visit to the housing project, including Sangali's 72-year-old barangay captain

but also interventions to improve the Bajao's sense of self-worth and pride, an equally urgent agenda. A commissioner of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples once described the Bajao as "the most marginalized of the indigenous peoples' communities."

With the stewardship of the city government, the barangay council is intent on pushing the other components of Project Hope. The pursuit of an ancestral domain claim for the Bajao is the stakeholders' latest success. [The title to 179 hectares of the mangrove area in Sangali awarded to the Bajao was secured weeks before this was written.] The people are also eager about the prospects of electricity and literacy classes in their new community.

"We know nothing. Most of us are illiterate... no read, no write," Sophia said. "When we are on land, we cringe at a

barking dog owned by a Christian. That's why I miss my father so much. He promised that for as long as he lived, he would send me to school." The memory brought Sophia to tears.

Having reached Grade 6 before her father died, Sophia, indeed, is one of the most educated in the community. Of all seventy certificates of ownership to their new homes that were given to Project Hope beneficiaries in Sangali, only three were signed in script; the rest bore thumbprints.

But more important, the Bajao are excited about the ongoing consultations to determine the livelihood and training needs of their families. "We have been asked about our plans, what we believe we're good at," Sophia said. "Although my father was a fisherman, my mother was a vendor, she kept a sari-sari store. That's why I believe I'll do well with my own sari-sari store."

A barangay councillor of Sangali organizes the certificates of ownership of the new homes. Note the thumbprint on the certificate. Present during the turnover ceremony in February 2005 were Ambassador Sutherland (with a new homeowner) and various DSWD and LGU officials.

