

Philippines: The House that GAD built

by Lina Sagara-Reyes

ALORAN, MISAMIS OCCIDENTAL—Washington D.C. is thousands of kilometres away from here but the White House, as the people here know it, is but a tricycle ride away from the nearest bus stop. No need to scramble for maps or seek directions.

What some local folks have nicknamed “the White House” is a public building welded on a promontory of land about 10 kilometres or a 20-minute ride east of the capital town of Oroquieta, where the Provincial Capitol is located.

Like its more popular counterpart in faraway America, the minimalist three-gabled structure designed like a regular middle-class suburban house, is fast becoming a major provincial

landmark of power in the off-centre barangay of Pelong.

Specifically, it is the seat of home-spun women power as it houses the province’s Gender and Development (GAD) Center and the one dozen staff of the Gender and Development Office. It stands as a testament to the faith provincial lawmakers have entrusted to its womenfolk.

Biggest budget in the region

The Misamis Occidental government holds the distinction of awarding the biggest fund in the entire region for GAD since 1999 onwards. Region 10 or Northern Mindanao is composed of Camiguin, Misamis Occidental and Oriental, Lanao del Norte and Bukidnon.

The first GAD plan received a P1.5 million (US\$28,974) kitty from

the 1999 budget, the earliest among the region’s local government units (LGUs), according to the Local Support Program, a non-governmental organisation.

Now, its budget, taken from the 20 percent development fund of the internal revenue allotment (IRA) for the province, has more than doubled.

Following the provisions of the Women in Nation Building Act of 1995, the province allotted five percent of its development fund from the IRA for GAD projects.

Collective effort

Most of the initial funds were used to build the GAD Center’s infrastructure, to constitute the Gender and Development Office and to organise GAD teams in the hundreds of barangays among its 14 municipalities.

In the preceding years, the budget was used to sustain the Center and other activities to strengthen the local GAD Teams and draft its Gender and Development Code.

The Provincial GAD Team is composed of Capitol-based development workers who did the spadework to convince legislators to approve the budget. Appointed by the governor, the GAD Team is also the implementing arm of the Center. It is an improvement over the law-mandated GAD “focal point/champion” and is rooted in



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the concept that a collective is much more effective and stronger than a single cause-oriented individual within a bureaucracy.

The GAD Team was given the freedom and support to spend the funds according to a plan the women's organisations themselves created through multi-sectoral consultations.

The GAD Team concept is now being replicated in the province's towns and villages and these teams work to make sure GAD projects, activities and plans get the fund support from the yearly budget allocation through gender planning in their very own barangays and towns.

"We don't have tips nor magic formulas on how the funds were used to build the Center and make it sustainable. Everything is hard work," says Rosario Balais, the lone woman legislator and chair of the GAD Team.

"We had a governor (former Governor Ernie Clarete, now first district congress representative) who was development-oriented through and through. Therefore, he understands gender issues and supports our efforts," Balais added.

Under former Governor Clarete's tenure, women village and town leaders were identified to constitute local GAD Teams on the recommendation of the town mayors and barangay chairpersons.

Legislative support

Even without a pro-GAD chief ex-

ecutive like Clarete, an executive order and a provincial legislative resolution have institutionalised the GAD Team. "Because of the legislation, we have security of tenure. Besides, the province's medium term development plan specifically provided for GAD," says Gonzales, the former GAD focal point and now head of the Provincial Gender and Development Office.

The specter of an indifferent and anti-GAD leadership is always present in this country lorded over by partisan politics. But so far, Clarete's party, including Loreto Leo Ocampos, the new governor, and Balais, still topped last May's elections. So the development plans, including that of GAD, are assured of funding support till 2004.

"We don't worry at all. Ocampos was our former vice-governor and he even authored the Gender and Development Code which is the basis of the creation of this GAD office," said Gonzales.

The rest of the team credit Balais for political brinkswomanship. "She has the convincing prowess. It was Balais' good relationship with the other members of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan, the local legislative body, which paved the way for the approval of the suggested budget," said Juanito Robillos, another GAD Team member.

Dina Anitan, who used to work as consultant to the GAD Team, further suggested that aside from identifying allies and champions among the ruling lawmakers and government officials, the province's GAD Team

should be reclaimed by the NGOs so that it could be kept away from the wiles and whims of politicians.

"The call of the hour now," urges Anitan, "is to keep an eye on the entire budget of the province and monitor how GAD elements are mainstreamed."

Gender mainstreaming is the term development workers use to refer to the regular programmes, projects and activities that have been reviewed as to their gender responsiveness or new ones that have to be designed to address gender issues and concerns.

Non-compliance of LGUs

The GAD allotment has been hailed as "one of the biggest legislative trophies of the millennium for the country's women." It meant all state agencies and local governments were to set aside a minimum of five percent of its budget to gender-related projects and activities.

But despite the enabling pro-women law, five years after it was passed, barely a third of the national bureaucracy complied with the GAD clause.

A monitoring team from the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women also realised that barely a fifth of the entire country's LGUs—from the barangays to the provinces—ever complied with the law on the GAD budget allocation.

In Region 10, most LGUs ignored the directive to give a portion of their budget to GAD. And even as NGOs

and the women's movement provided the pressure and the impetus beginning in 1998, still most LGUs turned a deaf ear.

In a recent book on action-research done by The Asia Foundation (TAF), "the lack of appreciation and understanding of gender issues" among local bureaucrats was identified as among the problems besetting the implementation of this supposedly empowering aspect of budget policy.

"...It probably reflects ignorance. Officials simply don't understand what gender analysis, gender mainstreaming and gender-friendliness mean," mention co-editors Debbie Budlender and Ma. Isabel Buenaobra in TAF's *The Gender Budget Trail: The Philippine Experience*.

Vision map for gender

The GAD Team had readied some kind of a "shopping list" of projects and activities through consultations with different women's groups. It became the "vision map" aimed to place gender high on the provincial developmental agenda, said Anitan.

"Having built the Center and sustaining it for years proves that we are not only good in planning parades and bailes (open air community dances)," says Maribel Gonzales, formerly the GAD focal point who now heads the GAD Team.

Gonzales further revealed that the Center has also become a one-stop shop for basic services for women, with projects ranging from a daycare and

child-minding centre, with particular emphasis on the kin of Subanons, the province's most populous indigenous peoples, to temporary shelter and counseling for battered women and rape survivors.

Help for battered women

In the second half of the 1990s, Misamis Occidental registered the highest incidence of domestic abuse-related referrals to the Regional Women and Girls Rehabilitation Centers in Cagayan de Oro City, noted the DSWD. One of the services offered by the Center is its crisis-response component.

"We can provide referrals and temporary shelter for women considered in danger of assault. The battered women don't have to go as far as Cagayan de Oro to get help," she said.

Gonzales further credits alliance and networking, partnerships with NGOs and line agencies like the Department of Social Welfare and Development and Department of Health as vital components of the Center's vigor and sustainability.

Unlike the original White House, this one in Misamis Occidental focuses not on "waging war against terror." Its efforts, humdrum but never lowly, are that of waging peace: the implementation of the Gender and Development Code, livelihood projects for impoverished women, research and women's health issues.

Source: Women's Feature Service, 16 October 2001

Women in Action promotes the empowerment of women through information sharing, communication and networking. It is published by Isis International-Manila, an international nongovernment women's organisation, founded in 1974. Isis has sister offices in Santiago, Chile and Kampala, Uganda. Its network reaches over 50,000 individuals and organisations in 150 countries.

Isis International-Manila acknowledges the support and financial assistance of the following partner-donor organisations: Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad, Inc. (Australia), Bilance (The Netherlands), Canadian International Development Agency (Canada), Christian Aid (UK), CIDA-Southeast Asian Gender Equity Program (Singapore), Evangelisches Missionwerk (Germany), Global Fund for Women (USA), Global Ministries-The United Methodist Church (USA), Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (The Netherlands), The Minister for Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Netherlands, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norway), Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Denmark), Swedish International Development Authority (Sweden), United Nations Development Fund for Women, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (USA).

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