

If the People Cannot Come to the Clinic, the Clinic Must Go to the People: ACDI/VOCA Launches Floating Medical Facility in the Philippines



By Patrick Childress

Providing health care to impoverished people on any remote island is problematic. Tawi-Tawi, an isolated island province in the southern Philippines, faces this challenge 307 times over.

Tawi-Tawi lies in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a portion of the southern Philippines with a Muslim majority that is administratively independent of the predominantly Catholic nation. ACDI/VOCA recently helped launch a state-of-the-art floating medical clinic to reach the province's most isolated island residents.

Provincial health officials and representatives from the U.S. Embassy attended the launch to celebrate the new resource that allows healthcare providers to reach out to isolated communities. "The main problem is how to have access to health," said Dr. Sukarno Asri, Tawi-Tawi Provincial Health Officer. "We thought that if people cannot go to the health stations, we will go to them through this floating clinic."

The clinic's first destination was the island of Simunul, where experts provided medical and dental consultations.

ACDI/VOCA organized the event in conjunction with the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM), receiving additional support from U.S. Agency for International Development representatives Wes Dulawan and Pinky Serafica.



Visitors tour the new floating medical clinic, which will now be able to reach Tawi-Tawi's most isolated island residents.

Originally donated through a Japanese development program, the floating clinic had fallen into disrepair after years of underfunding and poor maintenance. ACDI/VOCA was responsible for the extensive structural repairs needed to make the boat seaworthy. "We had to rehabilitate the hull from the keel up," said Sally Iadarola, vice president of ACDI/VOCA.

The floating clinic is one aspect of the three-year, USAID-funded Enhanced and Rapid Improvement of Community Health (EnRICH) project. EnRICH provides the tools and training needed to empower communities to proactively address health concerns. The program focuses on family planning, a delicate subject in Tawi-Tawi, which is 90 percent Muslim.

To put an end to the mistaken, yet common, belief that Islamic law forbids family planning, EnRICH organized a meeting of local Mus-

lim leaders called the *Mussawarah on Responsible Parenthood: the Muslim Perspective*. The result was a fatwa, a Muslim religious edict, proclaiming that family planning is acceptable under the Koran. The fatwa opens the door for the promotion of family planning and reproductive health in the region. The floating clinic will serve as an important extension mechanism for spreading these ideas to isolated communities in Tawi-Tawi.

Family planning is an urgent need in ARMM, where a 3.86 percent population growth rate, the highest in the country, stresses a society already struggling with unemployment and underdevelopment. "The high population growth is a recipe for disaster if we do not get a handle on it," Iadarola said.

Densely packed populations also have higher rates of transmission of communicable diseases. Pneumonia, acute gastroenteritis and malaria are common in the region. "Malaria is endemic in Tawi-Tawi; in fact, it is the number one cause of morbidity here," Dr. Asri said. By delivering care directly to patients on the remote islands, the floating clinic can treat those already sick

while preventing diseases from spreading further.

The mobility of the Tawi-Tawi floating clinic allows it to deliver basic health care to the province's most remote areas. The clinic will dramatically improve the health of previously inaccessible residents and expose these populations to new ideas regarding family planning and reproductive health. "The floating clinic is a symbol of better health and hope for the people in the isolated islands," EnRICH Project Director George Dalire said.

Tawi-Tawi at a Glance

- ✓ 307 Islands & 10 municipalities
- ✓ Population: 322,317
- ✓ Population growth rate: 3.86 percent annually
- ✓ Population below poverty line: 56%
- ✓ Major ethnic groups: Samal, Badjao, Jama-Mapun, Tausug

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—George Dalire, EnRICH Project Director

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