

MGA KWENTO NG

PagSibol

**& Butig,
Pagayawan,**
a Chance for Peace



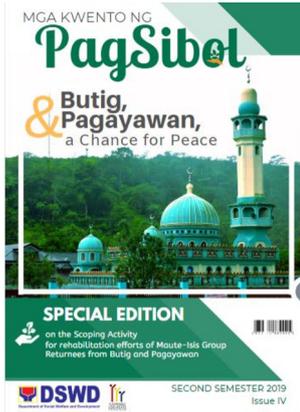
SPECIAL EDITION



on the Scoping Activity
for rehabilitation efforts of Maute-Isis Group
Returnees from Butig and Pagayawan



About the Cover



"Ka-payapa"

With the aftermath of the Marawi Siege, we are left hopeful and thirsty for peace. We look back as we move forward- and while taking bolder steps, let's be reminded of the people, who just like us, dream of a better life despite falling short of favorable circumstances.

These are the unsung stories worth telling.



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FOREWORD

Almost a year ago, the Mga Kwento ng PagSibol (MKP) covered and documented the stories of desperation, perseverance, and redemption of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) or "bakwits" borne out of the two-year old siege which haunted the lives of our beloved Maranao brothers and sisters.

Watching the war scenes from the television made it easy to pass judgments with every blow between the Maute - Isis Group and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), but breathing the same air of the siege's aftermath and standing on the ground where dreams have fallen made it hard to distinguish one reality from the others.

MKP came back to Marawi, this time with a hopeful spirit.

In compliance with the DSWD Secretary's directive to address the socio-economic needs of "returnees" or those violent extremists who have already decommissioned their firearms and have surrendered to the Government, a SCOPING activity, spearheaded by the DSWD Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP) was done on August 4-7, 2019 in close coordination and partnership with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Office of the Presidential Advisor on Peace Process, DSWD Field Office X, Local Government Units concerned, and other national government agencies.

The said activity intended to look into possible interventions and services which may be provided by the Department, considering the dynamics and contexts of the affected areas.

This time around, we chose to go where others would not dare to set foot in- the hearts of the conflict: Butig and Pagayawan.



MGA KWENTO NG PagSibol

The Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP) aligns its communication strategy to the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) and focuses on affirming the growth of SLP participant's capabilities and bridging livelihood opportunities towards inclusive economic development.

To further celebrate the early wins and the big impact of SLP in the lives of our program participants, the "Mga Kwento ng PagSibol" (MKP) creates an enabling and empowering platform so as to spark up the hope that the marginalized and vulnerable sectors do have a great chance in life. From humble beginnings to rewarding transformations.

'Mula sa PagSibol hanggang sa PagSulong'

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*From fighters to farmers,
Firefights to boodle fights,
Battlegrounds to playgrounds.*

BUTIG, PAGAYAWAN, & A CHANCE FOR PEACE

Years have passed since the Marawi siege had left thousands of families displaced and hearts broken, and with it are questions left unanswered:

**Has Marawi healed?
What does it take to give peace,
a second chance?**

As healing becomes a painful and tedious process especially for the affected families and individuals, various public and private institutions and agencies pour out their support to make things lighter and beneficial for Marawi.

While it is true that the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) pushes forward its best efforts to contribute in the continuous restoration of peace and socio-economic development of the Islamic City through its Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP), a call for more inclusive and holistic mechanisms echoed beyond Marawi's walls: **Butig and Pagayawan**, its neighboring towns which were equally affected by issues on peace and reintegration aggravated by the siege.



HEARTS OF THE CONFLICT

While some people consider August as “ghost month”, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) – Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP) took it as a chance to bravely visit the outskirts of Marawi despite the wails of a two-year old siege which haunted the walls of the Islamic city.

In response to DSWD Sec. Rolando Bautista’s directives to formulate special guidelines on the provision of livelihood assistance to the Maute-Isis Group returnees, the SLP National Program Management Office (NPMO) spearheaded a scoping activity which aimed at understanding the current socio-economic context of the Maute-Isis Group returnees, conducting an environmental scanning to identify the geographic conditions of the community where the Maute-Isis Group returnees reside, and identifying practical and feasible recommendations that would contribute in addressing the socio-economic gaps of the returnees and their communities

In close coordination with the DSWD Field Office X, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) 103rd Haribon Infantry Brigade, Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace Process (OPAPP), and the Local Government Units (LGU) of Butig and Pagayawan, the said scoping activity was conducted on August 4-7, 2019 enriching the insights gained through the

Maute-Isis Returnee Reintegration Program (RRP) particularly the AFP’s request to DSWD for implementation of a Cash-for-Work project.

In a context situationer session prior to the actual field visit, the DSWD SLP met with OPAPP and AFP at Kampo Ranao in Marawi City for an orientation on the Maute-Isis RRP which also included the updating on the efforts and initiatives of concerned National Government Agencies (NGAs) presented by Lt. Cathreen Enderez and Major Palawan Miondas.

In the session, the municipalities of Butig and Pagayawan, were highlighted as the hearts of the conflict in consideration that the said areas were among the original residence of the former Maute-Isis Group members. A significant number of violent extremists, a term used to address the Maute-Isis Group returnees, were initially profiled by the AFP which provided useful information pointing out to Butig and Pagayawan as the main areas of concern for the scoping activity.

With the set context, the concerned agencies, collectively known as the scoping team, then finalized its preparations and contingencies, with the guidance of Capt. Ron Villarosa and Col. Gerry Besana GSC (Inf) PA of Western Mindanao Command for Civil Military Operations (U7).





An abandoned structure resting within the vicinity of Nature's View in Butig, Lanao Del Sur

INTO THE LIONS' DEN

Butig and Pagayawan, landlocked municipalities which are both located in Lanao del Sur, served as the center of discord for the longest time since the mentioned were once inhabited by various armed groups like the Moro-Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and later was the Maute-Isis Group. As recommended by the AFP counterparts, the scoping team proceeded approximately 52 kilometers away from Marawi City to Butig as the first stop. An outsider would feel like the biblical character featured in "Daniel in the lions' den" upon mere sight of the place which was remotely situated in Nature's View sharing its spot with the Headquarters of Charlie (Cavaliers) Company 49 IB, 9 ID, PA Camp Darul-Iman – cryptic, yet unexpectedly quiet and conducive.



Just like Daniel, we kept our faith and went further into the lair. Most people who never had the chance to hear about Butig and Pagayawan would be expected to run for their life. But surprisingly, when we came to see the lions and looked into their eyes, we saw a second chance and a small flame of hope trying to rekindle.

As planned, the scoping team carried on with an orientation to establish the main purpose of the activity which was followed by break-out sessions or focus group discussions (FGDs).

During the FGDs, the returnees were asked about their previous socio-economic situations involving their main livelihood activities, how they were involved in the siege, the effects on their livelihood post-siege, their perceptions on how they may be able to recover from various aftershocks, issues and concerns that hinder them from efficiently and effectively sustaining livelihood gains, and their plans for their socio-economic rehabilitation through the support of the Government.

As the FGDs commence, I was able to have the rare encounters with some of the Maute-Isis Group returnees who had some stories to tell. Stories which were not heard on mainstream media. Stories which created different perspectives and perhaps a chance for deeper understanding.



Mr. Alfrey Gulla (DSWD) together with Col. Gerry Besana, and Capt. Ron Villarosa of the AFP during the final briefing for the scoping activity in Butig, Lanao del Sur



Ms. Jam Taha (DSWD FO X) provides an orientation to the returnees prior to the actual Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in Butig, Lanao del Sur



Mr. Jalal Said (DSWD FO X) facilitates one of the FGDs in Butig, Lanao del Sur



FROM FIGHTERS TO FARMERS

It has taken me a lot of courage to rub elbows with a Maute-Isis Group returnee who once held a high-powered gun and had blood in his hands, but it took a lot more empathy to lend an ear and listen to how “Asraf” (not his real name), 50, vividly recalls his own version of the scuffle.

Native to Butig, Asraf lived a modest life as a farmer. He usually keeps himself productive by attending to a small parcel of land for rice planting but often serves as a farming tenant to a landlord who owns a bigger area of farmland.

Asraf passionately describes how hard it was for him and his co-farmers to transport their yield to Marawi City as it was very impractical for them to go the usual route (which compels them to take longer and rougher ways) with the limitations, if not absence, of concrete road networks and access to bridges to bring them closer to Marawi.

Due to this geographical predicament, most of the small-scale farmers of Butig tend to just give-in to unjust and less profitable bargains of big-time traders to spare themselves from larger overhead costs and post-harvest expenses.

“ Simula’t-simula, kailanman hindi kami nakatikim ng magandang buhay ”

“We never had a taste of a good life”

- Asraf

Asraf’s eyes became teary as he described that they [locals of Butig] never experienced a peaceful and satisfying life since the time of Marcos. He exclaimed that they had not felt the support of the Government for a very long time.

Even health centers and medical treatments were out of reach alongside public infrastructures. It was basically a land that time may have forgotten.

They were often discarded and displaced as they were forced to evacuate their homes especially during the all-out-war in the time of then president Joseph Ejercito-Estrada.



“It was not a surprise that some of the locals here in Butig were easily persuaded to join armed groups in exchange of monetary compensation. Most of us here never had a chance to live a good life. That may explain why it was very easy to recruit people, who more often than not, had no livelihood to keep themselves busy”

Asraf narrated in Tagalog.



A photo of Asraf's (one of the Maute-Isis Group returnees) bust showing his hands as he narrates his story

Contrary to popular belief, Asraf also mentioned with conviction that the Maute-Isis Group was not initially aimed at fronting a divisive and violent group against the Government. In fact, the main purpose of the Maute-Isis Group, according to him, was to create a platform to strengthen and communicate Islamic teachings to communities.

“I personally know Omar and Abdullah, the Maute brothers. They were good lads who had good education. They were even sent abroad by their parents just to study. When they approached me and requested me to join their group for the sake of Islam teachings, I did not hesitate because I

believed it was for a good cause” Asraf mentioned in Tagalog, recalling his firsthand experiences with the Maute brothers whose last name created the foundations of the prime group involved in the Marawi siege.

Consequently, Asraf was convinced by Omar and Abdullah to join them for purpose of Islam education to the community. However, the originally good intentions later led to a destabilization plan against the Government, coming as a big surprise even for Asraf. Learning about this, it was too late for him to back-out



since he was engrossedly engaged with the Maute brothers and have already established a strong sense of loyalty and camaraderie at that time. Needless to say, the preaching of Islam by the Maute-Isis Group started out smoothly until it became a plot to spark up a looming conflict.

“I never wanted to be a part of the war. I was caught between loyalty and my yearning for a better life. I am just so grateful that despite the tragedy, I have been given a second chance to live and turn from my wicked ways. I just want a simple life with my family”

Asraf ardently exclaimed his piece as he recalled how the war brought him nothing but downfalls, even mindful that before his voluntary surrender, he had at least Php 600,000.00 bounty in exchange of his head.

Moving forward, Asraf tries to look at the brighter side by affirming how the influx of Government support and military presence in Butig are gradually becoming as a beacon of hope for their community. He even shared that he has gone back to farming and now tends to a small sari-sari store in their barangay.

Moreover, he also expressed his hope for a more promising life now that his wife passed the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) and his daughter has already finished a degree in Social Works.

“Now that we have surrendered and are gradually redeeming our lives back, we are starting to feel and appreciate the concern of the Government, especially the military. Never in our wildest dreams that we imagined being comfortable and even friends with soldiers. I, personally, tell the other members of our community not to be afraid of the mere sight of the AFP and other Government bodies, for they have a great plan for us so that we may be able to alleviate ourselves from poverty.”

“ A more gainful livelihood is one of the keys in achieving this dream ”

- Asraf

Asraf spoke in Tagalog as he wrapped up the conversation. He held and shook my hand. I felt his hands pulsating with warmth not because of the blood shed from the siege, but because he now enjoys the warmth of the sun he surely missed from hiding in their war bunkers.



Mr. Donards Kim Tanedo (DSWD) shakes hands with Asraf after the conduct of an interview

As I walked away to join the other members of the scoping team, a woman caught my attention. It seemed like she needed a good amount of sunshine because she wore a **nicab**. She looked at me and I almost felt that she was smiling beneath the black overhead dress which covered her entire face and body, leaving just a small opening for her eyes. 🌱



WIDOW'S WAIL

It was not hard to notice “Laila” (not her real name) in a sea of male participants during the focus group discussions. She casually shrugged her shoulders as a sign of her approval when I asked her if she could share something about her experiences and how she got into the list of the Maute-Isis Group member returnees.

Laila vividly recalled how she escaped the Marawi warzone by riding on a pump-boat together with (six) 6 other strangers across lake Lanao to reach safety, unwillingly leaving her seven children behind. With nothing but prayers, she hoped for the safety of her children who were under the safekeeping of one of her trusted friends who turned their house into a made-shift bunker to avoid wider devastation brought about by the skirmish. They made it through, fortunately.

As she continued her story, her eyes turned watery. She also mentioned how she coped up with the deaths of her previous husbands who were also part of the Maute-Isis Group, seemingly leaving her as a “black widow” trapped in a web of mishaps. Laila, gently whispered how she earnestly and continuously prays for a simple life. She mentioned that she would achieve her life’s content with only a small sari-sari store and all her children getting fair education—she tries to rebuild this dream with her current husband while being pregnant with her 7th child.

As soon as she ended her story, her eyes smiled at me and then she gracefully turned away.

The team hurried to the Municipality of Pagayawan for another set of scoping activities, following Butig. 🌱



A group of children receives snacks from one of the AFP soldiers in Pagayawan, Lanao Del Sur. The playground is one of AFP's projects through the UPSILON SIGMA PHI, in line with rehabilitation efforts



CHILD'S PLAY WITH [TOY] GUNS

With an altitude of at least 2,357 feet above mean sea level alongside the unpaved roads and mud tracks, Pagayawan proved to be geographically isolated and disadvantaged. A full blanket of mist and low-lying clouds enveloped the whole team as we enter the Municipality's gateway.

As the fog grew thicker and made it harder for visibility, we were committed to seek enlightenment from the stories that awaited our arrival.

Surprisingly, a bunch of kids beaming all smiles, swiftly welcomed us with excitement. It seemed like they did not show any sign of hostility nor fear amidst the influx of the heavily fatigued military trucks and the members of the AFP who casually carried high-end firearms.

For a moment, it struck me to believe that in spite of the war memoirs in Pagayawan, any government presence was still very much welcomed and anticipated. Just like how a child would embrace his father upon coming home after a long day at work.



As we disembark from the military and four-by-four (4x4) vehicles, the scoping team instantaneously facilitated the same orientation provided to Butig which followed similar focus-group discussions, in the endeavor to learn how DSWD may be able to contribute further in the continuous rehabilitation efforts

The sight of male participants (belonging to the same profile as Maute-Isis Group returnees) became usual following the same type of participants from Butig.

However, as I hover through the crowd of focus groups, I was immediately drawn to a young boy who calmly sat side-by-side with the adults. Doubtful on his participation, I called his attention to confirm if he was really part of the Maute-Isis Group returnees. He straightly responded with a nod and I felt my heart skipped a beat.

We typically see young boys playing rough with each other with toy guns and whatnot, but for the 14-year old “Ishmael” (not his real name), the game of survival was a reality. Ishmael never intended to be tagged as a terrorist or a rebel when he just wanted to learn more about his faith. As he told me his story, it was revealed that the Maute-Isis Group grew popular among children like him and were even idolized at some point because the façade of the group was really for the promotion or preaching of the Islam faith. Little did he know, Ishmael became part of a group that even after the Marawi Siege, left a positive impression in disguise on some of the locals.

Mindful of the vulnerability context, Ishmael was easily swayed as he even ran away from home to join the leftist, with innocence on what the Maute-Isis Group existed for.



AFP troops disembark from the military vehicle in Pagayawan, Lanao del Sur, after a heavy rainfall

“ We were fed fairly. We were really taken-care of. This is the main reason why I felt so secured about my decision in joining the group. They taught us the way of Islam. I never thought that they were the main perpetrators of the Marawi siege. I never thought about this until now ”

- Ishmael





Ishmael stands beside a see-saw while looking beyond the horizon in Pagayawan, Lanao del Sur

“

I don't want to return to that [Maute-Isis] group. Had I known, I would have never really joined. I also did not expect that my father was a member. He was just staying in another camp. I could never imagine how it would be like if my father and I stayed longer. Luckily, we were released. The first things that crossed my mind were my mother and my siblings

- Ishmael

”

He occasionally looked me in the eye. It was, as if, a way to show me that he was telling the truth.

I could feel every sense of audible regret in Ishmael's little voice as I stood beside him to listen. He added that he wants to become a policeman when he grows up. But first, he wants to be a kid again.



LOOKING BACK...



FROM FIRE-FIGHTS TO BOODLE-FIGHTS
The Scoping Team together with the Maute-Isis Group returnees share a boodle-fight for lunch after the conduct of FGD in Butig, Lanao del Sur

MARCHING FORWARD

In between the focus group discussions which were a vital part of the scoping activity, other members of the team, specifically Mr. Alfrey Gulla (Project Development Officer IV of DSWD SLP) took the chance to explore on the perspectives and felt challenges of the Municipalities of Butig and Pagawayan, through the lens of its local chief executives: Mayor Dimnatang Labay Pansar and Mayor Khalida Polao Sanguila, respectively.

Both local chief executives passionately expressed their support to the potential interven-

tions of DSWD in aid of the rehabilitation efforts for the Maute-Isis Group returnees. Although, it was very clear that both municipalities yearn for a more holistic program which may also benefit the other community members who were affected by the siege and other similar occurrences. These triggered for a more substantial and insightful discussion with the AFP and the other members of the scoping activity, serving as clear basis on the framing of future social welfare and development plans for Butig and Pagawayan.





Mr. Alfrey Gulla (DSWD) conducts a consultation dialogue with the Scoping Team and Mayor Dimnatang Labay Pansar at Butig, Lanao del Sur



The same consultation dialogue was conducted with Mayor Khalida Polao Sanguila of Pagayawan, Lanao del Sur

It may also be worthy to note that part of the results of the concluded scoping activities, the team arrived with significant inferences which may suggest that:

1

The Maute-Isis Group returnees are also victims of socio-economic, political, geographical circumstances which made them more vulnerable and fragile to anti-government activities such as engaging in violent extremism;

2

The current socio-economic conditions of Butig and Pagayawan with or without the Maute-Isis Group returnees necessitate action not only from the DWD but by other government agencies and private sectors. However, for any socio-economic support to be efficiently, effectively and quickly delivered, other various factors such as road access need to be resolved;

3

Any intervention should not only be focused to the Maute-Isis Group returnees but for the entire community. The engagement of the entire community means empowering them to be more resilient and pro-active in various contexts such as socio-economic, political, cultural, among others;

4

The affected families/individuals in areas where the effects of extremist activities of the Maute-Isis Group returnees were felt prior to the Marawi siege should be provided with needed assistance and the role of Task Force Bangon Marawi is needed to facilitate such assistance and;

5

The undertakings of AFP have contributed a lot in maintaining order and security and cultivated rapport with the community which is a solid foundation for other socio-economic interventions such as those from DSWD to be easily delivered.



In close coordination with the members of the scoping team, DSWD continuously gears up to address the various social welfare and developmental issues which were discovered through the activities done with the participants and the local chief executives.

Amidst the questions and doubts if Marawi, Butig, and Pagayawan really have a good chance at totally recovering from the siege's aftermath, one thing is definite:

They may have surrendered their guns, but they are not giving up the chance for a better, peaceful life.

The Philippine Flag stands with all its valor, one afternoon, in Butig, Lanao del Sur



“

We are not just battling terrorists, we are also battling ideologies. You can always kill the terrorist but you can never kill the ideology - you can only render it irrelevant

”

- Capt. Ron JR T. Villarosa

Army Special Forces
Special Projects Officer
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