

Darwin Initiative, Darwin Plus and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund Covid-19 Rapid Response Round - Final Report

Due within two months of the end date of the Rapid Response Round project

(maximum 6 pages)

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If linked with an ongoing project, please include that project reference here (e.g. IWT001)	24-016
Project title	Responding to livelihood impacts of COVID-19 in the Northern Philippines
Country/ies	Philippines
Lead organisation	Zoological Society of London
Partner institution(s)	Philippines Department of Agriculture Central Philippines State University – Research, Extension and Community Services (CSU-RECS)
Start/end date of project	January 6, 2021 – April 6, 2021
Which fund was this project relevant to?	Darwin Initiative
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1. Project Summary

Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), established in the Philippines in response to COVID-19 has included measures such as closing all but essential shops and businesses, ceasing public transportation and gatherings, and requiring permits and health certificates to cross borders. This has impacted people's movement, access to goods and services, and markets for income, with the Department of Labor reporting over three million jobs being lost nationally. In recent months there has been some easing of these regulations on a regional/municipal basis, but restrictions remain in place within our project area.

The two communities (Nagtipunan and Maddela – see Figure 1) in our Darwin-funded project (24-016) are highly dependent on tourism and service sectors. They have been impacted by restrictions, with no tourists visiting, access to food limited and stable alternative sources of income unavailable. Through the ongoing project monitoring (24-106), we have identified financial resilience is also being eroded with reduced contributions to the Community Managed Savings and Credit Associations (CoMSCA) in 2020 - from a cumulative total of in March to in September. This was decrease of ~18% compared to the same months in 2019. Further, CoMSCA loans have also declined to PhP in 2020 compared to the previous year, as people refrain from borrowing due to their inability to pay off loans.

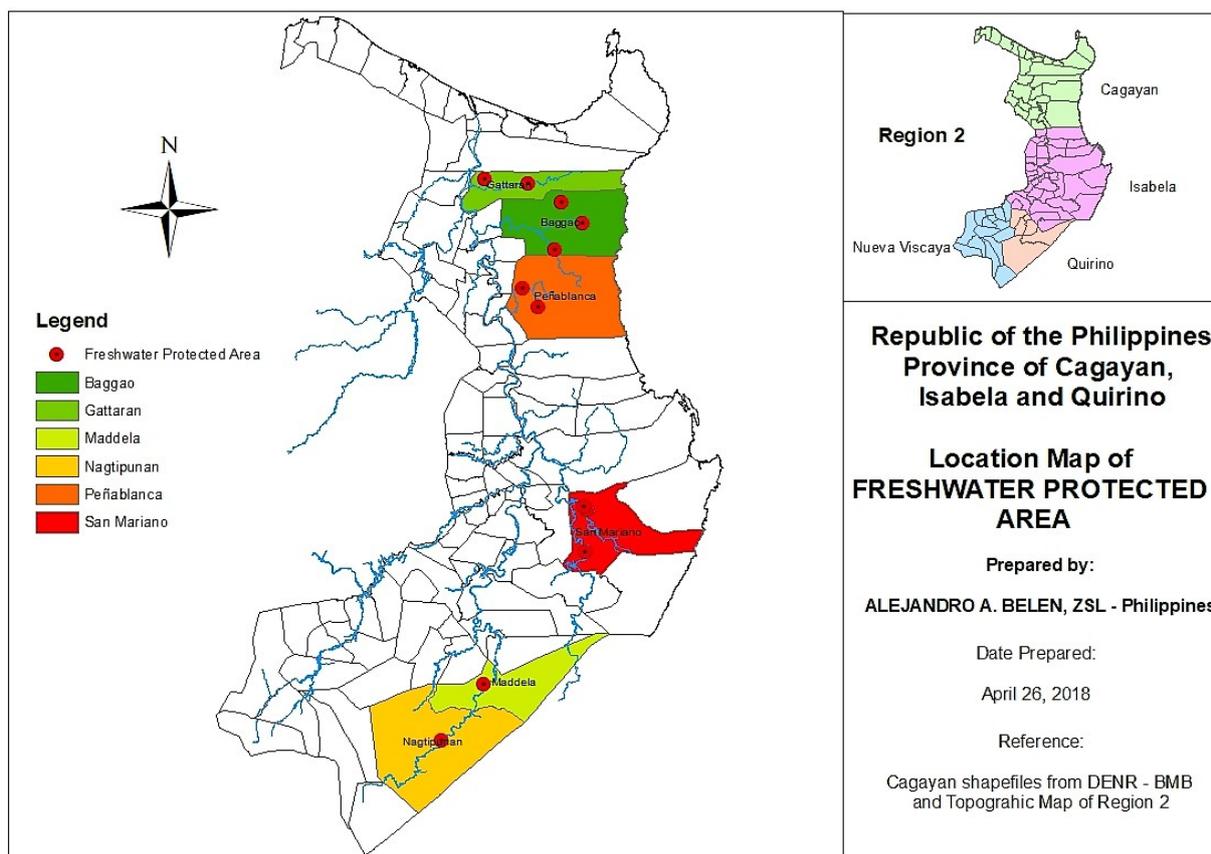


Figure 1. Map of the FS established during 24-016, our focal communities are the two southernmost.

The reduction in tourism may benefit the Freshwater Sanctuaries (FS) – freshwater protected areas established as part of project 24-016 - associated with these communities by decreasing the pressures on natural resources. Conversely, it is possible that communities are increasingly relying on fisheries as a source of protein and nutrition. This project will examine existing metrics – CoMSCA reports; fish-catch monitoring; river warden arrests/fines - to understand the pandemic situation, the effects of our interventions and develop recommendations for government bodies relating to the impact of COVID-19 on both livelihoods and biodiversity.

This project aimed to introduce mushroom and quail egg production livelihoods to three CoMSCAs in these two communities negatively impacted by COVID-19. The project endeavours to understand COVID-19 impacts on beneficiaries' behaviour pre- and post-intervention, using established socio-economic and biological data to determine the effect on both community well-being and FS biodiversity.

2. Project Achievements

Activities

The proposed Outcome of the project was - *Increased livelihood resilience within two communities through the introduction of mushroom farming and quail egg production facilities resulting in greater food production and security, with augmented income and household savings.* As a first step, we held five Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in line with restrictions on public gatherings – (Maddela Group 1 - Total 13 (M=4, F=9); Maddela Group 2 - Total 5 (M=5, F=0); Nagtipunan Group 1 - Total 11 (M=2, F=9); Nagtipunan Group 2 - Total 5 (M=4, F=1); Nagtipunan Group 3 – Total 7 (M=1, F=6); Total attendees 41 (M=16; F=25)) were conducted to determine how COVID-19 impacted the livelihood security and well-being of beneficiaries, the strategies communities used to cope with the pandemic, the impact on fisheries resources and, the implications for co-management efforts of FS. Results indicate that beneficiaries lost tourism-

related work and found it difficult to obtain new work outside of this sector. For example, many small to medium enterprises have temporarily or permanently closed their businesses. Farmers were especially impacted due to the influx of the swine flu affecting hogs, and the low price of corn; further, farm produce cannot be transported due to closure of borders with other provinces. Farmers/fisherfolks were encouraged to stay at home making these livelihoods challenging to do.

To cope, families avoided expensive items on grocery lists, such as meat, and used plant-based sources of protein instead. There was also an increase in the price of basic commodities. Respondents indicated that suffered from increased anxiety due to the quarantine protocol as they were afraid to be alone and away from their families. This was compounded by long lockdown periods preventing people from physically staying connected with friends and family, and no face-to-face classes for students from grade school to college.

Overall, there has been a perceived positive impact on the natural environment due to less disturbance and pollution. People are not adamant in wanting the reopening of the sites/river for tourism. They care more about their health and well-being than earning money from tourists.

Fishing continued after the easing of restrictions, mostly during the day as a curfew was implemented at night. Fish catch in the sustainable use zones of the two FS declined significantly in the months of ECQ from April and May 2020 compared to pre-lockdown levels. In the succeeding months (June to December 2020) catch increased compared to ECQ levels in one of the FS but was still below that prior to COVID-19 restrictions due to night-time curfews, while in the other it declined slightly. Most fish that were caught were consumed rather than sold.

Starter kits for the production of mushroom and quail eggs were developed to aid those CoMSCA members in focal sites affected by the pandemic. Training sessions in mushroom and quail egg production were conducted in tandem with the Department of Agriculture - Quirino Experiment Station (DA-QES). Following COVID-19 protocols of reduced capacity, a total of 37 CoMSCA members (M=11 F=26) were trained across four sessions by project partners and ZSL staff embedded in the communities – Maddela session 1: 13 participants (M=3, F=10); Maddela session 2: 6 participants (M=5, F=1); Nagtipunan session 1: 11 participants (M=2, F=9); Nagtipunan session 2: 7 participants (M=1, F=6). This training was replicated by the embedded ZSL project staff to other smaller groups of CoMSCA members who were not able to attend due to the health and safety restrictions. This meant that rather than the original three CoMSCAs that were planned to be engaged, we increased this to five – two groups were trained in both quail and mushroom farming, and three in just the latter. At the end of the implementation, the project was able to assist a total of 108 beneficiaries (M=40, F=68).

Challenges

Initially, the project targeted 64 members from three CoMSCAs across two communities. However, one CoMSCA, declined the project extended to them as they were caught up with the demands of preparation for the possible re-opening of local tourism. The group felt that it would not do justice to the project if they couldn't make time for it. However, as described above we were actually able to train 108 beneficiaries from five CoMSCA groups.

Restrictions in mass gatherings were in place to discourage human movement and to prevent the spread of the virus. This protocol changed frequently and at short notice depending on the number of persons infected in the locality and in neighbouring municipalities, and in response to recommendations from the national Inter-Agency Task Force against COVID-19. This meant accessing some sites and holding meetings was challenging on occasion. We aimed to overcome this by embedding staff in focal sites but they were sometimes still required to undergo the required quarantine as well as antigen tests. Unfortunately, we were not able to conduct post-intervention surveys due to COVID-19 lockdowns in both focal sites that were established in recent months.

All mushroom fruiting bags were to be produced by the DA-QES. The station, however, could only provide a limited number of requested materials. To remedy this, the Maddela Integrated Farmers Savings and Development Cooperative (MIFSADECO) was engaged to provide additional fruiting bags, which also brought additional income to the members of the cooperative.

Project design

CoMSCA membership in the Philippines is generally weighted towards females, and as such we have found it a very effective mechanism for empowering women through training and increased financial resilience. In this instance 63% of beneficiaries who received training in the livelihood options were women.

As highlighted previously, while we were only able to work with two of the three original CoMSCAs, we were able to increase the number of beneficiaries across five groups. The allotted number of 1000 mushroom fruiting bags per group were increased to an average of 1750 bags. This was taken from the budget surplus from building materials. The Local Government Units (LGUs) and the beneficiaries provided for the construction and/or repair of standing structures as mushroom houses. Ultimately these commodities are relatively high value and beneficiaries all received increased income, providing value for money in project spend.

With regard to partnerships, our historic establishment of, and on-going relationships with CoMSCAs as well as with associated communities and LGUs, was key in the success of the present project. The quail egg production starter kit was designed and previously implemented under the agricultural extension program of a State University that we have been working with beyond the present project. The mushroom production kit was developed by the DA as it has been identified and promoted as a high-value crop. As highlighted previously MIFSADECO were engaged during the project to support mushroom production.

Project achievements

The project's aim was to build community resilience to shocks, in this case COVID-19, which may impact existing livelihood options. This in turn we envisaged would reduce the chance of these communities turning to increased exploitation of natural resources. The relationship between communities and biodiversity is the cornerstone of Darwin Initiative projects and the work of the present project supports this. Further, the Darwin Initiative identifies the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) as a key framework in guiding the work that is delivered. The present project, in supporting FS and building capacity in the communities that manage them, supports Aichi Targets (AT) relating to habitat loss and restoration, sustainable management and protection (AT 1, 2, 4, 5, 6,7, 11, 14 and 18). Further, the work also supports a number of the Sustainable Development Goal targets (SDGt). CoMSCAs improve access to financial services that would otherwise be unavailable (SDGt 1.4, 8.10 and 9.3), increasing financial and social security (SDGt 3.8 and 5.4), alleviating poverty (SDGt 1.2) and allowing livelihood diversification. As previously stated, CoMSCAs are an established tool in ensuring gender (SDGt 5.5 and 5.7).

Objective 1: Assess the change of status of the focal communities through the establishment of socio-economic baselines using surveys, FGDs and post-intervention evaluation of existing CoMSCA members (n=64) in key sites.

FGDs and revealed that most beneficiaries received some level of support from the national government through the form of cash incentives for the displaced workers. While some families received some relief goods and cash, others did not, as the government targets to provide to the poorest.

The project provided immediate financial relief to the beneficiaries. Although not all groups were able to start their mushroom production at the same time, a total of 217.26 kilograms were harvested and sold to market at PhP 200 per kilo (£/kilo) from February 15 to March 31. This resulted in a combined income of per beneficiary.

Additionally, a total of PhP was earned by CoMSCA members reselling the mushrooms.

The quail egg production yielded a total of marketable quality eggs from February 19-March 31 with a total market value of PhP . This translates to about PhP income per beneficiary for the same time period.

Overall, the project increased food production in both municipalities where the intervention was implemented. With the increasing price of pork brought about by an outbreak of swine flu in the Philippines in 2020, communities now had access to additional protein sources. Additionally, average cumulative savings of the CoMSCA groups increased from Php in January to March 2020 to Php in January to March 2021.

All beneficiaries indicated that the income derived from the project will go towards their savings.

Objective 2: Analyse fisheries and enforcement data prior to, and during ECQ to date, and assess the impact of COVID-19 on FS management and natural resource use.

From Siitan FS (Nagtipunan), fish catch data from June 2019 to March 2020 within the sustainable use zone averaged 15.65 kilos/month – this declined to 3.5 kilos/month in April and May 2020 during ECQ. In the succeeding months from June-December 2020 the monthly average (13.39 kilos) was slightly lower compared to pre-COVID-19 levels due to a night-time curfew.

From Governor's Rapids FS (Maddela), fish catch from June 2019 to March 2020 within the sustainable use zone was 78.36 kilos/month - this declined to 16.75 kilos/month in April and May 2020. In the succeeding months from June-December 2020 the monthly average (9.71 kilos) was significantly lower compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. The further decline in monthly catch was likely due to restrictions being in place longer than those in Siitan FS.

Only one person was apprehended for violating the fishery law. Fishing in the FS was still regulated during the ECQ.

Objective 3: Collaboratively develop starter kits for two sustainable, low impact and rapidly established livelihood interventions for roll-out in key communities.

As stated previously these livelihood interventions were developed in collaboration with partners and at a higher level than initially expected.

Objective 4: Train 64 CoMSCA members to establish quail egg and/or mushroom production using starter kits.

One hundred and eight beneficiaries were trained in these livelihoods (see above).

3. Lessons learnt

The intervention generated income and provided food source for the beneficiaries in a short amount of time. What worked well was the counter-parting and collaboration with both the projects partners and beneficiaries in establishing livelihood interventions. Skilled beneficiaries were also able to share their expertise in the fabrication of the quail cages. What also worked well was the production and marketing of both mushroom and quail eggs – these were products that were identified as being sellable and the project met this demand. There is still high market demand for quail eggs, and this project has not fully met this which indicates there may be further opportunity for communities to develop this livelihood option in the future.

Under circumstances where larger groups of people could have been brought together for training and production, we potentially would have merged beneficiaries from CoMSCA groups in the same community. In some cases, progress was slowed due to there being limited

availability to perform tasks, e.g. labour-intensive construction work. By pooling CoMSCA groups, there would have been more available workforce, greater efficiency, higher production, and less competition in marketing the products. However, under the COVID-19 restrictions, this was not possible.

During the project implementation, it became clear that we may have also considered the possibility of including training on mushroom post-harvest and processing (e.g. mushroom patty, polvoron, chicharon). This means that when production is maximised, there is yet another alternative source of income for beneficiaries. This will also eliminate waste from unsold fresh mushroom.

Delivery was challenging under the COVID-19 restrictions, however having built strong relationships within communities we were able to address many of the issues that arose. By embedding staff in the focal communities, we were able to avoid a number of challenges that ECQ and movement restrictions would have presented if we had been based centrally. Further, the good relationships we had with partner agencies meant that we had the specific expertise that was required to deliver the project.

Other comments and feedback

In on-going discussions with LGUs in which the focal communities sit, post-project delivery, they have indicated that they are encouraging their constituents in other communities to consider these livelihood options and also to establish themselves into People's Organisations to be formally recognised and access resources and training opportunities.

We participated in a workshop on 25th May 2021 on Zoom entitled "The impact of Covid-19 on coastal communities" organised through another Darwin Initiative project (ref 25-024). Twenty nine participants from different organisations (IUCN, Flora and Fauna International, ZSL, Associação do Meio Ambiente) attended and presented preliminary findings of this study and other similar initiatives in Mozambique, the Philippines, São Tomé & Príncipe, Sri Lanka and India. We participated and provided insights from this project to discussions around the challenges and lessons learnt by NGOs in supporting communities through shocks such as COVID-19, how to inform future considerations, recommendations on mechanisms or policies, and solutions to strengthen our role in conservation.