

Development Takes on a Face and an Address in the Philippines



Municipality of Coron, Busuanga Island, Palawan (IDRC Photo: Michelle Hibler)

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“Waiting for something,” reads the sign above the small waiting shed on the side of the dusty road that cuts through a [baranguay](#) (village) in the municipality of Coron on Busuanga Island, in the Philippine province of Palawan. “Waiting for nothing,” reads another a kilometre or so down the road.

These two signs may well describe the feelings of many Palawanos, indeed of many Filipinos. Optimism, because of the national government’s commitment since the late 1980s to reduce poverty. Pessimism because, as Celia Reyes of the [Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies \(AKI\)](#) at De La Salle University says, “the performance of the Philippines with respect to poverty reduction has been very modest. While the incidence of poverty has declined over the past 15 years, the number of poor has actually increased.”

Celia Reyes is the project leader of the [Community-based \[poverty\] Monitoring System \(CBMS\)](#) network, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

The Philippines’ lackluster performance in reducing poverty is partly due to the boom-bust cycle of the country’s economy. It is also due to the country’s poverty reduction strategies and policies, says Celia Reyes. While poverty reduction targets were set for the first time in the country’s 1987–1992 development plan and successive governments made poverty reduction a central part of their platforms, “the practice of discontinuing programs associated with previous administrations has been disadvantageous to the poor.”

The need for timely data

Programs have also suffered from a lack of timely, accurate information on the nature and extent of poverty and a lack of means to monitor the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs. “We would know the impact of policies and programs only after three or four years,” Ponciano Intal, Executive Director of AKI, explained at the first National Conference on CBMS, held in Manila on

September 23 and 24, 2004. In fact, data on poverty was irregular, infrequent, and unmatched from survey to survey. No comprehensive profile could be drawn at any time. Data was also too aggregated to be of much use to local planners.

The CBMS was born out of that frustration. One of the tools developed in the early 1990s under IDRC's [Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies \(MIMAP\)](#)-Philippines project, it aims to provide policymakers and program staff with a good information base for tracking the impacts of macroeconomic reforms and various policy shocks. Tested in two initial sites, CBMS is now being implemented in dozens of municipalities, including province-wide in Palawan and, more recently, Bulacan. In April 2003, the Philippine Department of the Interior and Local Government directed all local government units — at the barangay, municipal, city, and provincial levels — to adopt the system's 13 core indicators for measuring poverty. Moreover, from its first home in the Philippines, CBMS has now spread, with IDRC support, to 12 countries. [See related sidebar: [A local government primer](#).]

The National Conference brought together 120 local, regional, and national government officials, researchers, and development workers to share their experiences in implementing CBMS and discuss its impact. "The many local government unit representatives at the conference is significant," conference moderator Ricardo Puno Jr told participants, "because if anyone should be concerned about local populations, it's you. And if the country is to be developed it will be because of local people and communities."

A tool for local governance

Indeed, if the original audience for CBMS data was intended to be national policymakers, it has proven to be an extremely useful tool for local governance, particularly as decentralization has shifted responsibilities to local government units. "CBMS gives you information about where you are now, where you should be, and how you're going to get there," said Joel T. Reyes, Governor of Palawan and a staunch CBMS supporter. "It provides reliable, relevant, and comprehensive data on the welfare conditions and development status across the province."

The uses of that data for evidence-based decision-making emerged clearly in the conference presentations. For instance, in Palawan's capital, Puerto Princesa, three areas were found to lack access to health centres. These will be constructed in the coming year, said Mayor Edward Hagedorn. Proof of inadequate access to safe water supplies and electricity has led to programs to extend these services in many baranguays. In Oring-Oring in Southern Palawan, for example, CBMS data identified a number of problems, among them poverty, poor sanitation, lack of access to electricity, low school participation, and low participation in community organizations. As a result, said Barangay Captain Ibrahim Palampisi, a feeder road is being built to enable farmers to get their produce to markets and 50 homes now have electricity. Increased water supplies, public toilets, new classrooms, and a day care centre have also been provided. In another barangay, the CBMS survey carried out two years ago has resulted in emphasis being shifted from infrastructure projects to social services such as a child feeding program.

The profiles of municipalities that emerge from the analysis of CBMS data also enable programs to be targeted to individual households — which will receive agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, sanitary toilets, or even subsidized health care or educational aid. As Serafin Blanco, Administrator of Mandaue City, Cebu Province, put it, CBMS is a means for "development to assume a face and an address."

Using a geographic information system (GIS), maps can be produced that clearly show households and facilities. For instance, in the municipality of Labo — the first municipality in the province of

Camarines Norte to implement CBMS — the maps showing the distance between the students' homes and the city's 10 schools provided one clue to low school attendance. And, said Mayor Winifredo Balce Oco, when the results were presented to the community for validation, other reasons emerged. "A number of these children are expected to be economically productive to help their families," he said. "Some households [...] do not have enough money to pay the tuition and moreover, provide for the day-to-day expenses of the children." To address this problem financial assistance and school supplies are now being provided to indigent households, he said.

For and by the community

Community participation is key to the success of CBMS. Informed from the outset about the objectives and uses of CBMS surveys, the community provides enumerators — barangay workers, health workers, students, etc., — and data processors. Information is collected from every household and the data is tallied and consolidated manually at the village level. Municipal aggregates are submitted to the province for further consolidation.

The processed data is returned to the community for validation and discussion. This empowers communities by providing them with information and a process through which they can actively participate in planning, said Celia Reyes. Barangay residents thus develop a keen sense of their priorities and are better able to articulate their needs to city planning officers. Armed with hard information on the condition of their community, they are able to play a direct role in allocating budgetary resources. And they can demand accountability and transparency on the part of government officials. Sometimes, community members discover that the solution lies in their own hands. In barangay Oring-Oring, for instance, a local organization and a businessman each donated public toilets to help solve the sanitation problem in two of the most seriously deprived communities. The households that share the toilets also maintain them.

If CBMS is spreading rapidly in the Philippines, the challenges of ensuring continuity and institutionalizing the system remain. But the commitment of conference participants to pursuing and promoting the system is encouraging. "In my term, I will make it law in the province of Palawan," said Governor Reyes. His pledge was echoed by Mayor Gerardo Calderon of Angono in Rizal province, Mayor Peewee Trinidad of Pasay City, and many others who are determined to implement and support CBMS in their municipalities and barangays.

The next steps are to scale up and ensure that national statistical agencies coordinate the generation of data. This would enable CBMS to go nationwide, said Celia Reyes. Also needed is technical assistance for local government units and a central repository for the data. And as Carmelita Ericta, Administrator of the National Statistical Office, pointed out, what government units need most is to recognize that information gathering is not a cost — rather, it's an investment.

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Sidebar

A local government primer

Local government in the Philippines is highly hierarchical. The country is divided into 17 regions, each of which includes a number of provinces. There are now 79 provinces, each governed by an elected Governor and Vice-Governor. Within each province there are both cities and municipalities, each headed by an elected mayor who is the executive officer. There are currently 115 cities and 1495 municipalities in the country. While cities are at the hierarchical level as municipalities, they are generally larger (a minimum, of 150,00 inhabitants compared to 25,000 for municipalities).

The basic political unit, the *barangay*, is similar to a village and, according to the *Local Government Code of the Philippines*, must contain a least 2,000 people in rural areas and 5,000 people in urbanized areas. The *barangay* serves as the primary planning and implementing unit of government policies, plans, programs, projects, and activities in the community, and as a forum wherein the collective views of the people may be expressed and disputes settled. Each of the Philippines' close to 42,000 *barangays* is headed by an elected captain and council.