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Community Emergency Employment Programme

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A fight for survival amid the pandemic

COTABATO CITY, PHILIPPINES - Almost a year since the COVID-19 lockdown, 46-year old Mohalidin Laguiaab barely survives with his family.

A father of 15 children, of which eight are male and seven are female, the pandemic has indeed taken a heavy toll. He used to earn a living as a tricycle driver, transporting students, parents and teachers to school. However, he lost his income as schools closed and switched to remote learning. To make matters worse, his children are missing out on education as they do not have mobile phones to access online platforms.

"When the pandemic hit, it was really hard for us to survive on a daily basis. We want to go to the province to get free bananas, fruits and vegetables but cannot go out. The education of our children has been deeply affected. We want them to finish school but we have nothing," says Mohalidin.

Mohalidin joined his father and uncle as combatants at 16 years old but later moved to the city in search of peace and decent work. His dream of a better future for his family pushed him to avoid the battle, and to break the cycle of armed conflict.

In the district where he lives, Mohalidin volunteers as a local nighttime patrol member where he is at the forefront of keeping peace and order in the community. For this, he receives a monthly allowance of Php1,500 (US\$ 30), which is not even enough to feed his family.

To help buy food, his wife washes clothes for other people. Two of his sons at 22 and 18 years old, assist in construction to earn a few pesos, while his

second youngest son who is eight years old sells rice cakes.

Plunging deeper into poverty

Since the pandemic, workers in the informal economy like Mohalidin have been the first to lose their income. Mohalidin has had to borrow rice to feed his family, and rely on help coming from local officials in their community.

"We are deeply affected. Like many people here, we are short of income. In other areas, I know people are also having a hard time. Maybe we should wait for this pandemic to be over so that we can earn money, and that my children can go back to school," cries Mohalidin.

The effect of the pandemic on ordinary workers and their ability to pay for food and basic needs has been catastrophic. Tentative signs of recovery are emerging but latest analysis by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the labour market impact of COVID-19 revealed massive damage to working time and income, with prospects for a recovery in 2021 slow, uneven and uncertain, unless early improvements are supported by human-centred recovery policies.

"The right balance and sequence of health, economic and social policy interventions are crucial along with support for jobs and labour income as well as fiscal stimulus packages. Income support measures for vulnerable and hard-hit groups like workers in the informal economy should be a priority," says Khalid Hassan, Director of the ILO Country Office for the Philippines.

In October 2020, the ILO with the support of the Government of Japan partnered with the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE) to provide emergency employment in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

The Community Emergency Employment Programme (CEEP) helped in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 in Cotabato City, Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, and 63 barangays in North Cotabato.

Extending social protection

With little steady income, Mohalidin registered to be part of the CEEP. He worked for 15 days, leading a team and cleaning canals in their area. As a Team Leader, he conducted a daily health check and recorded the temperature of the 24 members in his group.

Mohalidin received wages and social protection benefits during this period. He paid his debt from borrowing rice, and bought more to share with those in need. He also greatly valued the social security, accident and health insurance that he became entitled to.

"This was the only programme that extended social protection coverage to poor people like us. I thought I would die before ever being covered by such benefits at all. When you only earn a little, you use it to buy food instead of paying for social security, accident and health insurance," says Mohalidin.

Tragically, Mohalidin has first-hand experience of the importance of social protection. His two-year old son died in 2011 from diarrhoea after drinking unsafe water. Worried he would be snubbed without money or health insurance, Mohalidin relied on over-the-counter medicines instead of taking his son to a hospital. When they finally went it was too late.

But recently, it was the first time for his wife to give birth in a hospital - their youngest son and 15th child. A caesarean delivery saved the baby's life, with hospital bills covered by the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) for indigent members.



Mohalidin leads his team in cleaning canals and building handwashing facilities. (Photo © ILO/F. Paslangan)

Beyond emergency employment

Almost 1,750 workers in the informal economy like Mohalidin benefitted from CEEP, including wages and social protection benefits. MOLE has subsequently adopted CEEP as a regular government programme.

"We are so thankful for the support to our displaced informal sector workers affected by the pandemic. This programme will now be part of our regular activities and we will help more workers using funds from the government," shares MOLE Minister Romeo Sema.

Mohalidin is happy to hear that the programme will reach more communities. He hopes that the initiative will continue to assist workers like him deeply affected by the pandemic. After 15 days of work, he is looking for a job to make ends meet and support his family.

"Mohalidin's experience shows the life changing impact basic income and social protection can have. There is a clear need for further support to be extended to those impacted by COVID-19 as many families are struggling to survive," ILO Director Hassan concludes.

For further information, please contact:

*Ms Jennylyn Aguinaldo, Project Manager
ILO-Japan Water and Sanitation Project
aguinaldo@ilo.org / +63 64 425 5342*