

Acting Locally, Thinking Globally

It's a long way from fishing the waters off the island of Mindanao in the far south of the Philippines archipelago to begging on the streets of Manila. The Bajau people, an indigenous tribe known as "sea gypsies" for their nomadic way of life, but who have been displaced by conflict and commercialized fishing on Mindanao, now find themselves scattered around Central Luzon in the north, without homes, jobs or schooling for their children.

With the support of the Embassy of Canada to the Philippines, through its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), a community of 142 Bajau squatting in an encampment on the outskirts of Manila have received basic needs such as food, education, maternal and child health-awareness training, and training to establish new livelihoods.

Christopher Thornley, Canada's Ambassador to the Philippines, says the Bajau were originally living under a bridge in the province of Pampanga and making their way into the capital to beg on the streets. They saw their makeshift homes wiped out by flash floods caused by two typhoons last October.



The Bajau people of the Philippines
photos: Ed Villanueva

"These people live in some of the worst poverty I've seen here," he says, adding that the Bajau project is a perfect focus for the CFLI.

The fund finances \$15 million in small-scale projects out of 62 missions around the world, with priority areas including economic development, food security, youth, advancing democracy and ensuring security and stability.

Beginning this April, the administration of the CFLI will be transferred from CIDA to DFAIT. René Cremonese, director of DFAIT's planning, advocacy and innovation division, says the move will mean that the fund can be more strategically applied as a tool to meet Canada's foreign policy objectives and promote Canadian interests.

Last year, the fund provided \$420,000 to support 12 projects in the Philippines, out of a total of 180 requests for contributions, says Francis Bacaron, the CFLI program coordinator there.

The \$27,000 project to assist the Bajau was carried out from last July to December in partnership with a local NGO, the God's Love for Indigents Ministry. The once proud Bajau have been "pushed onto the sidelines," Bacaron explains. Efforts to help them include training in literacy and skills, such as rug-making, jewellery design and gardening.

Bacaron says the support of the embassy is "bringing a lot of attention to the Bajau and helping them to be part of the mainstream." The group has already had success, with some of their children having been accepted into the formal school system.

"This kind of program sends a lot of the right messages for Canada," Thornley says. "We're a caring society, we are interested to see that wealth is distributed fairly, and we want to give people an opportunity to succeed."

He says the support for the indigenous group has a human rights and security focus as well, with a goal of working with local governments to get the Bajau permanently housed and better integrated into society.

The embassy's 180 staff often get involved in community-building works through its volunteerism committee, Thornley says, sometimes alongside Canadian companies located in the Philippines. The philanthropic efforts are important team-building exercises and provide further opportunities to reinforce Canadian values.

Thornley, who recently visited the Bajaus, says it's touching to see what a tangible impact even a modest contribution can make in people's lives. "It's very satisfying," he says.