



February 2022

## Safe water for displaced families

Tens of thousands of low-income households in Cagayan de Oro, the Philippines, have been displaced by disaster or eviction and moved to relocation sites in and around the city. The 'Ridge to Coast Rain to Tap' (R2CR2T) project helps to connect these families to safe and clean drinking water, an essential element for building their new lives.

Cherry Ann E. Lucagbo bolted upright in her bed, torn from her sleep by the commotion outside. Through the thin walls of her house, she could hear neighbors shouting and children crying above the terrifying sound of gushing water. The Cagayan de Oro River had burst its banks and was rapidly pouring into the living room downstairs. Cherry Ann knew they had to act fast. In the pitch dark, she hurriedly put 5-year-old Chevron Jon into a washtub, threw in a stack of photos and hasted outside, followed on the heels by her brother who had tossed toddler Mark onto his shoulders. Amid the turmoil they swam towards the main road, the strong current pulling at their legs as they pushed the tub out in front of them.

Cherry Ann gets emotional as she recalls the traumatic experience: "I cried, Lord! I was so nervous, my heart was beating fast, all my focus was on was getting my children to safety."

Exhausted and in shock they reached higher ground, where they were soon reunited with Cherry Ann's husband Ronnie who had rushed back from his night shift. Many other inhabitants of Cagayan de Oro were not as fortunate. That night of December 16th 2011, tropical storm Sendong, the cause of the flood, claimed 1300 lives and damaged over 50,000 houses, making it one of the most destructive typhoons ever recorded on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the local government of Cagayan de Oro designated dozens of relocation sites in and around the city for rehousing Sendong survivors. Cherry Ann felt a huge relief when it was finally their turn. In the summer of 2017, the Lucagbo family left their damaged home on the riverbank for a new house in Berjaya GK Village in Bugo, a colorful relocation site built on a hilltop.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Like many other relocation sites, Berjaya GK Village was not yet connected to the city water supply network when the family moved in. Every morning before work, Ronnie would refill 12 jerrycans with water at a water vendor downhill and push the heavy load up to their house using a wooden pushcart. At PHP 5 per container, this amounted to roughly PHP 1800 (~EUR 32) per month, almost 20% of the family's income.



Cherry Ann, her three children (Princess, Chevron Jon and Mark) and her father Adulfo in front of their new home in Berjaya GK Village. Mark holds one of the jerrycans that the family used for collecting water.



COWD employee Annilyn Castigon (left), President of the Berjaya GK Village Homeowners Association Monico R. Capirig (middle) and R2CR2T Project Manager Adriaan Ruijschoot (right) next to the relocation site's newly connected water tank.

The Cagayan de Oro Water District (COWD), the agency responsible for providing water to the city's 700,000 inhabitants, established a partnership with the Dutch drinking water company VEI to expand water supply to the most disadvantaged relocation sites.

Through the 6-year R2CR2T project, VEI provides trainings, technical expertise and financial assistance to strengthen COWD's capacities and performance. One of the project's targets is the installation of 7,000 new water connections for low-income households, particularly in relocation sites. The project is co-funded by the Water for Life Foundation and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW).



Annilyn inspects one of the 1300 water meters installed through the project to date.

In April 2021, the Lucagbo family got their own water connection with the support of the project. Cherry Ann smiles as she rinses her laundry under the tap behind the house. She is delighted about the convenience of having running water at home as well as the reduced costs, paying only PHP 232 (~EUR 4) per month, COWD's baseline fee for the first 10 m<sup>3</sup> used. With the money saved, she plans to renovate the kitchen and save for the future: "Priority is the education for my children. My eldest is now in the second year of high school. He wants to study to become a chef, he loves to cook."

Although the family now has a secure supply of safe and clean water, Cherry Ann has kept her old habit of harvesting rainwater in a drum, which she uses for watering the plants: "We already experienced the hardship of having no water. Now I teach my children that conserving water is very important."



Cherry Ann's water meter



Cherry Ann treasures the photos she managed to save from the Sendong flood. All the family's other belongings were swept to sea by the water. Princess looks over her mother's shoulder, she was not yet born when the devastating events happened.



In the decade following Sendong, Cagayan de Oro's relocation sites gradually became populated not only by flood survivors, but also by evicted informal settler families and other urban poor.

Carlos and Raquel Silva and their 4 children had been living in a small house in an informal settler community for almost 30 years. They earned a living as sidewalk vendors in the neighboring market area of Cogon, selling snacks, soft drinks and cigarettes to passersby.

When they were evicted from their home to make way for a commercial construction project, the city government offered the Silvas a 56-square-meter lot in relocation site Lutheran/Golden 36. In this area, residents are expected to construct their house themselves. Using wood from their previous home, Carlos and Raquel built a temporary shelter, which Carlos occupied alone for the first three years to avoid losing the lot. The shelter had no kitchen, bathroom, water or electricity. Once the family had enough savings, they constructed a 3-bedroom concrete house and Raquel moved in together with their daughters and grandchildren.

Although the family was thrilled with their new house, accessing water remained a struggle. Every morning, Carlos and Raquel would wake up at 3 a.m. to fill their collection of buckets and containers at the communal tap. When they heard that Golden 36 would get connected to COWD's distribution network through the project, they applied for a household connection immediately.

Raquel beams as she shows her shiny new kitchen: "We are so happy to have water now, with 24-hour pressure. No need to wait in line at the communal tap anymore." Getting a water connection was the final step to make their house truly their home. Raquel and Carlos now have more time and energy to take care of their grandchildren and enjoy their retirement years.

Disaster and displacement can have a profound impact on the affected families. Loss, trauma, financial burdens and lack of basic services can stand in the way of recovery and limit the families' abilities to adapt to the changing circumstances. By improving access to safe and reliable drinking water, the R2CR2T project partners support people like Cherry Ann, Carlos and Raquel in building new and fulfilling lives, paving the way for a brighter future.



*Raquel in her new kitchen, with 24h running water*



*Carlos, Raquel and their granddaughter Micah in front of their home in Golden 36*

*Text and photography by  
Arianne Gijsenbergh*

### **Ridge to Coast, Rain to Tap (R2CR2T) project**

The R2CR2T project aims to improve water supply and sanitation conditions for the urban poor, boost the performance of COWD, and reduce flood risks and vulnerability in the Cagayan de Oro River Basin in Mindanao, the Philippines. The project is a public-private partnership between VEI, Cagayan de Oro Water District, Philippine Red Cross, Netherlands Red Cross, Unifrutti, Hineleban Foundation, Bukidnon Indigenous Peoples Advisory Council, Cagayan de Oro River Basin Management Council, Wetlands International and FITC. The project is co-funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) through the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW).