PHE CHAMPION: FILEMON ROMERO

Promoting Integrated PHE Approaches in Tawi-Tawi, Southern Philippines

When Dr. Filemon G. Romero—otherwise nicknamed Mon—enters a community in his native Philippines, he sees connections and links between aspects of daily life that others might miss. He sees women and adolescent young wives without the voice to express or the capacity to meet their reproductive health needs. He understands that fishers are struggling to feed their growing families by traveling farther and farther each year in order to catch fish. Most of all, he perceives and values the local buy-in needed to implement integrated Population, Health and Environment (PHE) approaches at the grassroots level—an approach that requires strong cross-sectoral collaboration among diverse stakeholder such as local government units, health agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that promote family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH), and coastal resources management (CRM) groups.

Since 1996, Mon has worked for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in the Philippines, locally known as Kabang Kalikasan ng Pilipinas Foundation, Inc. (KKPFI). He first encountered the term “PHE approach” when he was invited by Save the Children to present a paper on “Policy Development in PHE in Muslim Communities: Tawi-Tawi in Focus” at the first International PHE Conference in Antipolo City in November 2004. In that talk, he discussed the Fatwa on Reproductive Health—ban on family planning—imposed by the Muslim faith leaders in the southern provinces of Mindano and the challenges this ban creates to practicing birth spacing and family planning in communities with the highest population growth rates in the country.

In his current role as Project Manager, Mon is responsible for the overall implementation of a five-year, European Union-funded project called “Integrating PHE Actions in the Autonomous Muslim Region of Mindano” (ARMM), Philippines. Initiated in January 2010, this integrated PHE project targets predominantly Muslim communities in the three municipalities of Sitangkai, Languyuan and Turtle Islands in Tawi-Tawi Province, with a target population of 98,212. Under Mon’s leadership and direction, KKPFI is working closely with local government units, diverse community stakeholders and health partners to improve access, availability and voluntary use of FP/RH services and to strengthen CRM in selected field sites. With support from the “Building Actors and Leaders for Advancing Community Excellence in Development” (BALANCED) Project, KKPFI is building the capacity of local partners such as mothers, Adult Peer Educators, Youth Peer Educators, and Community-Based Distributors of FP commodities to increase community members’ access to FP/RH services. At the same time, project partners are improving and strengthening the effectiveness of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) management and coastal law
Mon has been a constant and staunch advocate for PHE approaches and integrating across sectors. He believes that addressing the triple bottom line or the three E's (Equity, Economy and Environment) of the Sustainable Development Framework is alone not enough. Rather, he and his colleagues at WWF see how PHE initiatives can help a conservation organization with expertise in CRM—organizations such as WWF—to also incorporate population and health programs into its conservation agenda and how PHE initiatives can create additional opportunities for effectively engaging communities. While there are many challenges in Tawi-Tawi to implementing PHE approaches, Mon and project partners are encouraged by the vibrant collaboration among local government units and stakeholders and by the buy-in of local partners, especially the local government units, to embrace and adopt the integrated PHE approach in their municipalities.