

PHILIPPINE LEARNING BRIEF 2021:

ECOWEB'S USE OF COMMUNITY LED RESPONSES IN THE PHILIPPINES 2017 - 2020

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An all-women self-help group in Marawi City poses with their handcraft products, supported by a micro-grant for livelihood recovery.

Photo: Hidaya Macarandas, 2019

1. Introduction

Established in 2006, ECOWEB is a Philippines NGO based in Mindanao working on humanitarian response, conflict transformation, poverty alleviation, environmental restoration, human rights and promotion of good governance². Since 2017, following initial support from L2GP, ECOWEB has been incorporating survivor and community-led crisis response (sclr)³ approaches into all its humanitarian programming. ECOWEB's interest in doing so is to strengthen survivors' communal self-help capacity, not only for meeting immediate lifesaving and recovery needs, but also for reducing vulnerability to future disasters. A detailed description of the sclr approach can be found [here](#).

Experiences from its initial pilots using sclr to support communal responses to sudden onset disasters were shared in an L2GP learning brief in 2018⁴. Since then, ECOWEB has continued to apply and develop sclr approaches in a range of natural and man-made crises, including typhoons, floods, earthquakes, mudslides and the armed conflict and destruction in Marawi city which resulted in displacement of over 260,000 people. During this period, ECOWEB has supported over 900 emergent self-help groups using micro-grants and a range of community-based facilitation⁵, networking and capacity-strengthening services drawn from the sclr toolbox and adjusted to fit the different emergency contexts encountered. In most (but not all) cases, these adapted sclr approaches were applied alongside conventional externally led humanitarian interventions targeting individuals and households (with both cash and in-kind relief). The 900 self-help initiatives (supported with micro-grants varying in size from \$100 to \$5,000, average of \$1,500) were directly addressing needs of approximately 17,000 households (at least 87,000 people) and contributing indirectly to the well-being of many more.

Despite the remarkable aspirations, scope and coverage

of its operations, ECOWEB, like most NNGOs, remains largely dependent on grants from INGOs which typically have tight margins for core cost recovery. There is little support for broader learning or documentation that goes beyond validation of pre-planned outputs and outcomes required by INGOs and donors for their projects, especially in disaster response. ECOWEB can only partially fill this learning gap using the more flexible multi-year funding that it receives from some INGOs, coupled with the high work ethic of its staff.

To allow further capture and documentation of lessons, ECOWEB and L2GP secured the services of a part-time, four-person research team (three national and one international, with a relevant range of cultural, linguistic and technical backgrounds) over the course of several months during 2019/20 to contribute to further lesson capture. The research was carried out with minimal financial and technical support and had to fit in with the punishing logistical and workload demands of ECOWEB who continued to respond to multiple emergencies during the study period. The study team interviewed 36 self-help groups (225 people), plus members of their wider communities, to learn more about how the impacts generated related to the different aspects and variations of the sclr approaches used. The full and detailed research report authored by the two lead researchers (which includes the notes from all case-studies) can be found in the L2GP website⁶.

This L2GP learning brief attempts to pull out and summarise the key findings drawn from the detailed research report and present them as concisely as possible. Given the complexity of many of the issues, the brief offers only tentative broad conclusions and misses much of the detailed and nuanced considerations emerging from the full research report. Interested readers are encouraged to contact ECOWEB directly and L2GP and the researchers/authors to discuss any points in more detail (contacts provided at the end of the paper). ■



This self-help group in Balo-i, Lanao del Norte decided to pursue cooking and selling of native snacks made of rice, sweet potato and cassava.

Photo: Hidayat Macarandas, 2019

2. Background to sclr and its application by ECOWEB

Sclr approaches, while adaptive to context, rest on a number of core guiding principles⁷. Foremost among these are those related to tapping into autonomous collective self-help and maximizing local ownership and agency through transfer of power and decision-making to the people in crises themselves. ECOWEB, as the leading agency promoting the use and development of sclr approaches in the Philippines has helped define and shape such principles. However, as a medium sized national NGO based in Mindanao (far from Manila), funding is always in short supply and often compromises are needed to accommodate the stipulations and compliance demands attached to grants. In reality, ECOWEB still faces limited opportunities to ‘convince’ donors to adopt all aspects of power-transfer on which sclr approaches are based. The reasons for this are varied⁸ but the result has been that ECOWEB often had to compromise on core elements of the basic sclr approach and explore options for trying ‘hybrid’ approaches that included:

- the *facilitated establishment of new self-help groups* to ensure **all** households of a targeted population form groups (rather than seeking out only autonomous, self-mobilising groups)
- subsequent *awarding of micro-grants to **all** of the groups formed* to ensure 100% of targeted households have the opportunity to access grant support
- accommodating *donor/INGO-imposed sectoral constraints* on type of group initiatives that could be supported (in some cases confined strictly to livelihood recovery only)

Making adjustments to the core sclr approach is very much in keeping with its guiding principles of adaptation to context, experimentation and learning by doing. Furthermore, as discussed in this paper, ECOWEB has demonstrated considerable success – and rich learning - from its pioneering and innovative work with sclr in a wide range of humanitarian and protection contexts. Given the large numbers of displaced, the learning around potential for using sclr to support collective self-help, both in the contexts of IDP camps, evacuation centres, within affected communities, and when dispersed among host populations, has been particularly important.

At the same time, changes which might result in weakening the sense of local ownership and moving beyond support for autonomous, self-mobilising self-help groups can affect outcomes. While well aware of this, ECOWEB as a national NGO has limited room to manoeuvre with donors and could risk losing much needed funding if rigid compliance demands imposed by funding agencies are not met. Although this learning brief focuses on the humanitarian outcomes and lessons related to methodology as captured by the original research, these broader institutional issues reflect similar dynamics observed in other countries and are explored further by L2GP elsewhere.⁹ ■



Posing beside their sweet potato and cassava plants, these survivors sustained their communal farm by cultivating new markets and partnerships in nearby Cagayan de Oro.

Photo: Kareen Bughaw, 2019

3. Overview of main research conclusions

Across the wide range of emergencies covered by ECOWEB, the research findings endorse sclr as an effective means of promoting the collective agency of affected people to identify, design and implement their own emergency and recovery initiatives and strengthen opportunities for communal self-help. Many of the same benefits documented in other countries were revealed, specifically:

- the **diverse and highly responsive nature of initiatives** arising from the detailed knowledge of local opportunities, capacities and needs which typifies grassroots action
- the **efficiency of the approach** that enables one local agency to support such a wide sectoral range of activities which reflect the different micro-contexts of so many different people
- the **sense of dignity, confidence, and self-reliance** generated in – and highly valued by – the crisis affected communities involved
- the opportunities for supporting **women leadership** despite gender norms that discourage such processes

- the increased **connectedness and social cohesion** stimulated, especially among IDPs in evacuation centres who did not previously know each other
- the benefits of tapping into **local “good-practice” mechanisms** for collective decision making, dispute resolution and mutual accountability

At the same time, the research reveals some of the challenges in applying sclr and its limitations in different contexts. In doing so, it highlights methodological issues that require further attention, in particular around options for promoting group formation and for addressing livelihood recovery through collective action. The study also points to the tensions that a national NGO such as ECOWEB experiences when trying to reconcile its commitment to downward transfer of power to citizen groups with the upward compliance requirements of INGOs and donors, combined with the tendency of grants to under-prioritise operational costs of NNGOs. ■

4. Summary of selected key findings

This learning brief pulls out some of the core lessons from the main report clustered around the following themes:

- a. Diversity and richness of self-help initiatives that can be easily supported
- b. Efficiency, speed, and accountability achievable through systematic use of micro-grants
- c. Enabling communal agency and strengthens psychosocial recovery and resilience
- d. The potential (but lack of support for) locally developed coordination and advocacy platforms
- e. Self-mobilising groups vs. externally mobilised groups for collective livelihood projects
- f. Interaction of local cultural dynamics with sclr outcomes
- g. Women's participation and leadership
- h. Synergy between household and group cash transfers to support self-help
- i. Wider social, political, and economic benefits

For the sake of brevity, only one or two illustrative examples are provided for each theme; readers can find many more details from the full report¹⁰ which further highlight the complexity and inter-relatedness of much of the learning.

- a. A community-led approach leads to a rich diversity of activities that accommodate the multiple different opportunities and capacities for self-help found in all communities, not easily replicated by conventional top-down approaches

Being cash-based and end-user-driven, the sclr approach automatically adapts to local priorities and opportunities without requiring formal needs-assessments and is limited only by the capacities and ideas of local people to find local solutions and by market access to allow purchase of necessary inputs. The research highlights the enormous range of local responses that can be supported by sclr across very different disasters and contexts, including Caraga Flooding (2017), Surigao Earthquake (2017), Marawi siege (2017), Typhoons Tembin (2017) and Mangkhut (2018), affecting both urban and rural areas, some so isolated that mainstream assistance remained absent. Homes, water supplies, and business/livelihoods were severely affected. In Luzon (Typhoon Mangkhut), the perpetual risk of landslides meant that mines were closed, eliminating

a major source of livelihood for the area. Through the sclr facilitated by ECOWEB, local communities rebuilt homes, established stores, rebuilt water schemes, started new businesses, and bought relevant inputs to re-establish existing livelihoods, e.g., fishing nets, farming tools and inputs.

The massive destruction, displacement and trauma caused by the Marawi siege in 2017 presented a particular challenge for mainstream aid due to the dispersed nature of IDPs, their lack of trust in official aid mechanisms and the very diverse nature of their needs, coping mechanisms and options for returning home. Many of the 260,000 initially displaced were hosted by families in the surrounding towns and districts to which they fled; by 2020 an estimated 73,000 still lived either with host families or in evacuation centres. ECOWEB was able to successfully use sclr to support hundreds of groups from both populations to undertake their own recovery initiatives, who in turn implemented livelihoods activities such as rice-trading, fruit picking and selling, street food, *sari sari* (simple grocery) stores, baking, fish processing, jam making, technical essential services such as welding, brickmaking, tailoring, community clean up farming, and gardening – and even ice-cream production.

- b. Low administration micro-grants were highly efficient and effective with very low rates of diversion or corruption. Where funds were fully hand over to, and managed entirely by, local groups the sense of ownership was increased.

To apply for support, groups were asked to develop simple page-long proposals with budgets and then required to keep receipts for financial accountability. All groups felt the demands were reasonable, although a small proportion (10%) felt this implied they had to 'earn the trust' of ECOWEB. Research findings indicate that the freedom to purchase locally not only benefited local economies but increased the efficiency and effectiveness of inputs, for example for shelter repairs in the Surigao Earthquake or for fishing nets in Caraga Flooding. The sense of satisfaction and ownership in being trusted also came through clearly from group feedback. In some cases, ECOWEB purchased inputs on behalf of community groups because of concerns that they might not meet the rigid procurement

and contractual requirements of some donors. Some reduction in the sense of local ownership at the outset of implementation was detected as a result, although ECOWEB's active involvement of SHGs in planning, designing and budgeting helped maintain the crucial power-transfer principle of sclr.

The combination of high trust and low administration meant that funds were distributed, and projects implemented, more quickly. Marawi siege survivors interviewed were unanimous in highlighting that ECOWEB micro-grants were the first assistance they received with the fastest impacts on well-being.

- c. A people-led approach, enabling groups to do their own analysis, decide their own initiatives, and implement on their own terms had significant impacts on communities' sense of agency, dignity, hope and sense of self-reliance, even for future disasters.

Being frequently affected by disasters, Filipinos are no strangers to humanitarian assistance provided by national and international actors. Mutual trust as well as a sense of self-worth and self-help is usually low in the aid interventions which most people are exposed to. As one group member put it when describing mainstream relief: *"We were ashamed to queue and receive goods. This sort of aid does not understand Maranao people because of maratabat [local concept of pride or dignity]"*¹¹

Respondents expressed overwhelming appreciation for the alternative approach promoted by sclr which encouraged them to find their own solutions in their own ways, respecting local culture and recognizing local capacity. *"There is a change in the perspective of the people [...] that only way we can uplift our lives is to help ourselves [...] regardless of the amount of assistance [...] if we do not lead and share our work then we will remain at our weakest state. If another crisis occurs, we know now to focus on our opportunities to respond rather than the problems"* (Survivor of Marawi siege).

It was striking how much of the feedback highlighted this issue of how the type of aid influences people's own sense of agency, either dampening it (when people are treated as helpless victims) or activating it when they are supported to recognize their own potential. *"The process awakened me, because I was participating, I took action: now I have an income and we can support our daily needs"*¹².

- d. Following the Marawi conflict, establishment of new locally conceived coordination mechanisms added significant value by informing the wider response at different levels and providing a means for IDPs to engage with decision makers in Government. However, despite strong voluntary efforts from local CSOs involved, lack of resources prevented these promising initiatives from demonstrating their full potential.

Within a month of the crisis, ECOWEB and a small group of NNGOs brought together all local CSOs working in and around Marawi with religious and traditional leaders to establish a local response coordination mechanism called the Bangon Marawi CSO Platform (BMCSOP). BMCSOP for some time served as a local parallel mechanism to the UN-led cluster system and coordinated engagement with the government, sharing information both horizontally and vertically (something which had been previously found lacking by locals and INGOs so often IDPs did not know what was available to them). It enabled locally-led, coordinated assessments of different IDP situations and offered recommendations to government and humanitarian agencies. Since a high proportion of IDPs chose not to move to official IDP camps but rather disperse amongst host communities in towns around Marawi, BMCSOP was particularly important in helping a more locally informed response to emerge¹³. Furthermore it led to the formation of the *Sowara O Miyamagoyag*¹⁴ (SoM, translating as 'Voice of the Marawi IDPs'), a local advocacy platform led by 12 elected IDPs was created which represented the voices of over 12,000 IDPs. This became a vehicle for amplifying the voice of the IDPs towards Regional government agencies as well as to the national policy-making bodies in Manila, partially addressing frustrations on the ground with the top-down nature of the wider aid responses and the official coordination body¹⁵.

Despite their contributions, both BMCSOP and SoM struggled to find even minimal support from formal national and UN coordinating bodies. Given the particular need for very localised and updated information on the ground combined with the conflict-sensitive nature of the Marawi crisis, this lack of aid support (whether financial, technical or institutional) to demand-led, local coordination systems seem particularly regrettable.

- e. The use of group grants for livelihood recovery showed mixed results. Pre-existing, self-mobilized groups were generally more successful than externally mobilized ones. However externally mobilized groups still generated positive outcomes, especially in IDP evacuation centres where new connections were formed thereby strengthening social cohesion. More learning is needed to guide the ‘when and the how’ of linking externally promoted group formation to micro-grants.

The Marawi conflict led to a massive urban livelihood crisis impacting hundreds of thousands of people. While recognising that livelihood recovery is primarily driven by individual families, ECOWEB also realized that the limited aid funds available meant a household-based response would benefit only a small proportion of the effected population. This would not only “leave many behind”, but also provoke serious divides and tensions, weakening the social cohesion so central to the collective resilience of crisis affected people.

In an effort to reconcile these differences, ECOWEB decided instead to use the available funds to try to reach **all** IDPs that were ready to form new groups to develop collective livelihood initiatives that could bring in some income to all members of each group. This adaptation of the core sclr approach (which normally focuses on working with autonomously self-forming groups) was necessitated by a context in which the overwhelming need for livelihood regeneration could not be met by available aid funds. It was not intended to provide the ideal long-term solution for livelihood recovery but was rather an innovative approach to help people to at least start to address their felt priorities and rebuild their self-reliance and dignity, while avoiding provocation of social tensions due to lack of sufficient kick-start funding.

Some 75% of projects studied generated some financial returns to members, with 58% reporting between 30-110USD per member per month. Almost all the livelihoods were micro-enterprises of one sort or another; a group’s capacity to capitalize on local market opportunities thus had a high influence on returns. Initiatives based on members’ previous livelihood experiences and skills sets were more successful. Cases where new collectives formed on the basis of shared production skills (e.g. individual displaced welders coming together to buy expensive equipment, or fish

processors) stood out as success stories despite members having had no previous knowledge of each other.

Of the 30 groups interviewed by this research, 6 were pre-existing and self-formed, e.g. a self-organised group to reconstruct shelter in San Francisco and a women’s collective in Butuan (Caraga Flooding). All of the self-mobilising groups were still working at the time of the research (and some had taken on new activities beyond their sclr-supported project), while less than 60% of the externally mobilised groups (i.e. formed just to access sclr grants) were still active 2 years later. In part this reflects the inherently temporary nature of IDP “coping” livelihoods, many of which would not be transferable when IDPs were able to return home to Marawi. In part it reflects the challenges of **collective** livelihood endeavours, related to lack of sufficient profit per group member for long term viability and to cases of groups breaking up and re-forming around a family group. Nearly 70% of the active livelihood projects became family-run businesses. Almost one third of all externally mobilized groups expressed some cases of internal tensions connected to issues of work allocation and equitable sharing of income, or over decision making processes or internal power dynamics or on conflicting opportunities of members to return home.

The issue of protracted displacement seems particularly important. Thus, where all members of displaced groups could not return to their homes (for example those displaced to Pacalundo IDP evacuation centre), all the groups facilitated by ECOWEB remained operational even 3 years later: “*the process of forming groups brought us unity, those who didn’t know each other before became closer and we began to support each other*”¹⁶.

Participants interviewed split 50/50 on whether group micro-grants were an appropriate method to support livelihood recovery. Those in favour mentioned the positive impacts on making new relationships and strengthening social capital (even in instances where the actual livelihood project provided little or no sustained financial returns). Also appreciated were the sharing of skills, the larger workforce and start-up capital and access to credit or goods in kind at wholesale price). Others highlighted the importance of recognition of the group by ‘outsiders’. This was seen as important for ongoing action and support where groups saw themselves as agents for ongoing local recovery and development, petitioning government or non-governmental

organizations for change or for additional support. Those against highlighted the norm of individual/family-run businesses, the low rates of individual return, risks of inequitable sharing of benefits and related tensions that can arise within externally mobilised groups.

- f.** The influence and role of local culture on outcomes is significant: group dynamics, systems of accountability, conflict sensitivity, self-worth and dignity are all impacted. The importance of PALC in exploring these cultural influences – promoting positive one and avoiding negative ones – is highlighted.

All cultures have their own internal power dynamics and issues of inclusion and exclusion, as well as means of dispute resolution and holding community members as well as leaders to account. The research depicts many instances where Maranao cultural concepts such as *maratabat* (discussed previously) and practices such as *maswara* (community meetings to resolve group disputes) were employed to increase local accountability, avoid or quickly resolve potential conflicts within or between groups, manage sensitive processes such as income distribution and strengthen internal monitoring. ECOWEB's PALC facilitators were quick to see the opportunities for linking such constructive cultural practices into the sclr process. The research revealed multiple instances where groups acknowledged the positive outcomes from the cultural sensitivity of how the approach. *“What strengthens us is, while he is your brother, everything we draft took place in a maswara so no one can go against it or break the rules since we have consulted everyone, and the decision was made by everyone [...] we call for a maswara every time it is needed”.* (Survivor of Marawi siege)

However, the research also shows how cultural dynamics can at times limit the equitable participation of community members. In some cases, local respect for *maratabat* resulted in community members being reluctant to speak out to external actors about possible self-interested action of community leaders. This reflects the value attached to local social cohesion and solidarity – the social capital retained by upholding *maratabat* is judged to be greater than any potential benefits that might accrue from disrespecting it, especially in front of outsiders. It also highlights how important, sensitive and difficult is the task of PALC facilitators to find culturally acceptable means of minimizing risks of inequitable outcomes. While there are no cookie-cutter

solutions for such complex social issues, the crucial first steps engage community members in frank discussions on such issues and creating space for locally acceptable solutions to emerge.

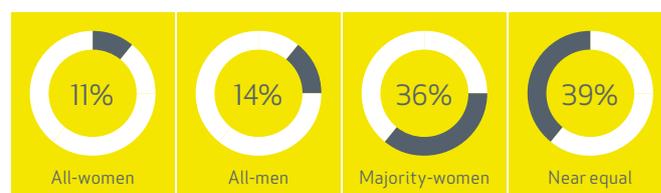
- g.** Women's leadership and participation is more likely to occur in women-only groups

The active pro-woman focus of ECOWEB's PALC facilitators and the inclusive nature of the sclr approach allowed high levels of women's participation: 86% of all the Marawi groups had women membership of which 54% of groups were all or majority women, despite the traditional domination of men in Maranao culture. Especially in the women-only groups and in those with all women leadership, women were very clear on their appreciation of the opportunity and its significance in challenging gender norms that give preference to men: *“We are confident about our skills in this business. This process is the first time we were given the chance to be leaders. We are proud of ourselves.”*¹⁷

However, the role of women in leadership position was nuanced. In some of the mixed groups, women's leadership was acknowledged as being 'face value', with men reportedly making the decisions, and women often 'elected' to represent their husbands or brothers as men were busy elsewhere. This was particularly true for traditionally male livelihoods groups, e.g., farming. The research indicates that in some cases, women were able to use this limited space to demonstrate their potential and encourage co-male leaders to more genuinely share power, but not in all.

Interestingly, women-led, and mixed leadership groups demonstrated much longer staying power. Of the livelihoods' projects still active at the time of research (c.2 years after their formation), 93 % had women leaders - either fully women-led (41%) or with some women leadership (52%). By comparison, almost 66% of all men-led groups had disbanded.

Membership by Gender



h. Synergy is clearly apparent from use of sclr alongside needs-based household cash transfers (HCTs). The active encouragement of group members to contribute a small % of their HCTs to group funds bring more nuanced and mixed impacts and deserves further research.

In nearly all the disaster responses covered by the research, sclr was applied alongside more conventional, targeted HCTs. The synergy of the two approaches was apparent in all cases: enabling individual households to respond to their own personal needs while also allowing local capacities, opportunities, and solutions to be leveraged by **collective** efforts using group grants. In some contexts, ECOWEB experimented with encouraging group members to contribute a portion of their individual household cash to the group's collective budget. This allowed a significant increase in purchasing power of the group grant as well as enabling a faster start up (within 48hrs). The ECOWEB grant provided a guarantee that motivated individuals to come together. Even without the incentive of a group grant, there were examples where IDPs living with host families decided to undertake a collective investment through pooled individual funds. In other cases, cash earned through cash for work was used to finance group livelihoods initiatives such as small stores or restaurants.

However, the practice is still being explored and the research indicates mixed outcomes dependent on context often with complex interplay of issues. Some group members resented contributing to the collective, feeling their potential to respond to their own needs was weakened as a result. Some perceived the 'encouragement' to contribute as an external requirement to access a group grant rather than a genuine local initiative, thus reducing the sense of ownership. Others acknowledged how their initial resentment transformed into appreciation as longer-term social impacts became more apparent, not least in the forging of new connections and friendships and sharing of new skills and knowledge. In such cases it seems, the approach taken by ECOWEB helped them learn (or relearn) the benefits of collective self-help over the more limited focus of traditional household cash transfers.

i. Use of a sclr approach can reinforce the initial agency and initiative of survivors to generate longer term community action and advocacy aimed at addressing root causes of vulnerability. This requires continued engagement by PALC facilitators and sustained back funding for NNGOs like ECOWEB to support crisis affected communities to protect their future.

The research reveals several examples of groups looking at reducing future vulnerability to crises. In the response to 2017 Typhoon Tembin/Vinta, previous experience with sclr, as well as DRRM training, contributed to communities deciding to invest a portion of the group grant in tree planting to stabilize riverbanks and to share disaster preparedness tips, such as keeping documents together in bags. *"We are now prepared better"*¹⁸. In the already marginalized San Francisco municipality (worst affected by the 2017 Surigao Earthquake), lack of assistance by government spurred residents to act. Using their knowledge of neighbourhoods and infrastructure, the autonomously formed 'Concerned Citizens Response Group' led a survey to assess damages and the necessary repairs. Informed by a volunteer engineer from the affected community, they identified the works required and the grant necessary for each family. Despite ECOWEB's contribution being limited by lack of donor funds, within 3 months all targeted houses had received substantial repair with significant impacts on safety and well-being. The group continues to be in demand, with other affected residents seeking their advice and assistance where local government has yet to respond: *"Based on our experience, those in the community have more wisdom and capacity than those in the municipal level leadership. The municipal officials really don't know what's happening on the ground"*¹⁹. It is striking that even without support, the advocacy efforts of such groups (including those responding to the Marawi crisis) is to inform policies and practice of duty bearers to address root causes of crises. How much more could be achieved if NNGOs such as ECOWEB were enabled to support them further? ■

5. Conclusions

The research findings provide further evidence and insights on the application and adaption of sclr approaches to provide responsive and efficient disaster programming across a wide range of contexts. They highlight the capacity of disaster-affected people to identify and build on the many local opportunities for collective self-help (material and psycho-social), in ways which could never be achieved by externally managed humanitarian interventions.

With over 900 self-help groups supported with micro-grants, many of which have also received conventional emergency household cash transfers, ECOWEB's experiences also reflect the scalable and synergistic nature of applying sclr alongside mainstream aid practices. ECOWEB's use of sclr in the Philippines over the last 3 years also provides a good example of how grassroots embedded national NGO can manage donor funds at scale to facilitate locally driven humanitarian interventions in ways that would be impossible for international aid actors.

The study also points to aspects of sclr application that deserve further action-research and attention: methodological, operational, and institutional. This learning brief identifies the following issues as being of particular importance:

At an operational level, understanding the options for **how best to promote collective initiatives** warrants further exploration. Should group formation be actively facilitated as a means of enabling more people in need to avail of sclr support? Or will this result in an increased frequency of dysfunctional groups and risks inherent from 'imposed' rather than 'spontaneous' collective self-help? A related issue concerns the efficacy of promoting **group action specifically for livelihood recovery**. Are the drawbacks in promoting collective initiatives for what are normally individual or family-managed enterprises justified by secondary benefits (e.g., new relationships and networks) and avoidance of weakening social cohesion through targeted interventions?

Another methodological issue highlighted by the research is around the **potential of sclr in evacuation centres and IDP camps**. The case studies suggest that in such contexts, where typically people may not know each other but share a strong sense of solidarity, facilitated group formation for collective action is

particularly relevant. The opportunities provided by sclr for acknowledging survivors' capacities and potential for agency and self-help seem particularly appreciated in contexts of IDP (or refugee) camps that can so erode sense of dignity and inadvertently promote learned helplessness.

The benefits of **enabling women leadership of collective action** are highlighted by the research, reflecting a common trend documented by L2GP in numerous other contexts²⁰. The study also indicates similar reasons found elsewhere: the greater solidarity often found among women that predisposes them more towards collective action, the additional motivation they feel when (at last!) given the chance to lead their own initiatives, their readiness to work hard and persevere. How could the contribution of such positive experiences be leveraged to generate more transformative and sustainable changes in gender norms? Could sclr be doing more to tackle social constraints that prevent more equitable power relationships between women and men? Crises can provoke ephemeral opportunities for systemic shifts in local social and political norms; given women's obvious importance in driving humanitarian action and recovery, apart from the moral imperative around gender justice, can sclr get better at using such transformative opportunities to enable greater women leadership post crises?

The potential of supporting locally conceived mechanisms for **demand-driven coordination, information sharing, and advocacy** stands out as a significant lesson from the locally led response to the Marawi crisis. Despite lack of funding, the determination (and volunteer spirit) of ECOWEB and other local CSOs to create locally informed coordination bodies and platforms for allowing the voices of survivors to influence national and international programming has been remarkable. There is little doubt that even greater benefits (both immediate and longer term) could have been generated with small additional financial support - as little as \$25,000 a year to fund a coordinator position and allow minimal meetings, communications and mobility would have made an enormous difference. Greater effort is needed by donors, OCHA, responding INGOs and relevant Government Departments to promote and fund such initiatives. Similarly, sclr guidelines need strengthening around how to encourage and support such locally led coordination initiatives.

A specific opportunity for coordination was seen between emergency HCT programming and sclr in which the **potential for synergy** between needs-based, targeted household cash grants and opportunity-based, communal self-help grants being demonstrated in a number of cases. This certainly deserves more attention; the recently released guidelines by CaLP on the use of group cash transfers²¹ provide an encouraging basis for exploring such opportunities for integrated uses of cash. In particular, the strengths and weaknesses of encouraging individual contributions from household cash transfers into collective efforts requires further research as does the manner in which such initiatives might best be promoted - and in which contexts. Given the central importance of strengthening social capital to build resilience, improving our understanding of how humanitarian action (internal and external) can best impact on communal cohesion is clearly a priority.

In carrying out the research, it was apparent how unhelpfully constricting **the transfer of compliance demands** by some donors and INGOs was to ECOWEB. Not only do these create an enormous additional workload for national agencies already operating on minimal overheads, but they also directly reduce the space that NNGOs need if they are to prioritise innovation, adaptation, local leadership and learning-by-doing. They are well-termed as “perverse incentives”²² placing huge pressure on NNGOs to prioritise a fail-safe approach to implementation and reporting in direct opposition to the safe-to-fail mindset required for open and genuine learning. Given this trend, it is a tribute to ECOWEB that they are not already much more ‘protective’ of cases where outcomes were not as positive as hoped for, or more guarded about sharing experiences which went in unplanned directions. Until donors and INGOs start to rethink the current norm of transferring their risk management concerns onto their so-called national ‘partners’ it seems inevitable that the opportunities and capacities for constructive learning will, in practice, continue to be eroded. Much needs to change before **a genuine learning culture can emerge within humanitarian programming**; being more aware of and honest about the institutional incentives that work against learning would be a good start.

Sclr approaches recognise the risks that come with disbursing grants to communities in distress. ECOWEB’s experience suggest that a key part of

effective risk management lies with PALC facilitators engaging explicitly with community groups about anticipated challenges and involving them in developing possible mechanisms for mitigating such problems. Dealt with this way, even locally sensitive issues such as potential group capture by local powerholders can be addressed before they become personalized. However, enabling such adaptive and innovatory approaches also requires increased space, flexibility, and willingness to learn from supporting INGOs and donors. The current tendency for rigid systems and procedures reduces the space for innovation, especially when funds are increasingly limited.

Building on this, future research should include detailed time and motion studies of NNGO staff to provide a clearer understanding of the split between labour and time demands generated by sclr compared with those required to service the compliance demands passed down by donors and sub-contracting INGOs. This would provide a better idea of what are the actual financial and opportunity costs of meeting compliance demands and of transferring risks to local actors. More work is also needed to capture the perceptions and concerns of the INGO and donor staff responsible for overseeing sub-contracts to NNGOs regarding the enabling and constraining dynamics affecting incorporation of sclr approaches within mainstream humanitarian programming. ECOWEB’s experience suggest that international partners who are already supporting multi-annual term “developmental” projects were more ready to embrace the nexus programming inherent in sclr. The increased flexibility of their funding allowed immediate life-saving humanitarian needs to be met, but in ways that gave greater space for local leadership, learning by doing and the more transformative and resilience related processes that sclr seeks to engage with.

Local NGOs such as ECOWEB who are much closer to local realities have no problem embracing the interconnectedness of so called “humanitarian” and “developmental” programming; indeed, they see it as a natural part of life in Mindanao. If international humanitarian actors are serious about localization, they need to catch up by redeveloping their own capacities for such reality-based nexus thinking. ■

End notes

1. Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines, Maya Street and Kei Valmoria Bughaw, 2020. <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
2. Visit the ECOWEB's website for more details on : <https://ecowebph.org/>
3. Survivor and community led crisis response - practical experience and learning from Haiti, Kenya, oPT, Myanmar, the Philippines and Sudan; 2021 ODI/HPN Network Paper 2021; <https://odihpn.org/sclr>
4. See L2GP Learning Brief: Learning from Survivor and Community-led crisis-responses-in-the-Philippines; June 2018: <https://www.local2global.info/research/local/sclr-in-the-Philippines>
5. These community mobilisation, animation and facilitation techniques were drawn from the PALC (“participatory action learning in crisis”) basket of tools from the sclr approach being applied and adapted by ECOWEB
6. <https://www.local2global.info/sclr/training/>
7. See Chapter 3 of “Survivor and community led crisis response - practical experience and learning from Haiti, Kenya, oPt, Myanmar, the Philippines and Sudan”; 2021 ODI/HPN Network Paper 2021; [odihpn/sclr-practical-experience/](https://odihpn.org/sclr-practical-experience/)
8. See Chapter 4 , ibid
9. Ibid
10. Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines, Maya Street and Kei Valmoria Bughaw, 2020; <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
11. Survivor of Marawi siege, quoted in “Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines”; <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
12. Ibid
13. A key pillar of BMSCOP, the “Lanao del Sur People’s Council” has now been officially invited by Central Government to support downward accountability in the reconstruction programme of Marawi city; see: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles> and <https://dhsud.gov.ph/news/tfbm-chief-lauds-csos-for-monitoring-marawi-rehab/>
14. See SoM paper produced in May 2018: [idp-cso-proposal-for-the-rehab-of-marawi-and-for-peace.pdf](https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/IDP-CSO-Proposal-for-the-rehab-of-Marawi-and-for-peace.pdf)
15. See: <https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/dead-and-missing-a-year-after-the-marawi-crisis/>
16. Survivor of Marawi siege, displaced to Pacalundo Evacuation Centre quoted in “Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines”; <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
17. Survivor of Caraga Flooding quoted in “Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines”; <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
18. Typhoon Tembin survivor quoted in “Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines”; <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
19. Surigao Earthquake survivor quoted in “Impacts and lessons from sclr approaches to disaster and crises in the Philippines”; <https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Ecoweb-Philippines-research-paper-sclr-2020-final.pdf>
20. “Survivor and community led crisis response - practical experience and learning from Haiti, Kenya, oPt, Myanmar, the Philippines and Sudan”; 2021 ODI/HPN Network Paper 2021 [odihpn/sclr-practical-experience/](https://odihpn.org/sclr-practical-experience/)
21. See: <https://www.calpnetwork.org/publication/group-cash-transfers-guidance-and-tools/>
22. See for example ODI’s report “Time to Let Go” (2016) <https://www.odi.org/hpg/remake-aid/#let-tinggo2>

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