



# Integrating conflict sensitivity in private sector disaster management

Lessons from the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation



CBi Case Study  
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### Key Takeaways:

- Implementing conflict sensitivity in private sector disaster management is not always as straightforward as theory might suggest, as non-textbook challenges may occur along the way that disrupt programme design and implementation.
- It is critical for private sector networks to start somewhere, act effectively and efficiently, and do as much as possible with the resources and knowledge available.
- The concept of conflict sensitivity was new to private sector stakeholders responding to the conflicts in Zamboanga and Marawi City, but with a simplified process for analysis and tailor-fitted tools, private sector actors were able to play a vital role in rebuilding fragile and conflict-affected communities.

## Background

In 2013 when a [firefight broke out](#) between Government forces and a rebel group called the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the Philippines, the latter took over Zamboanga City for three weeks, taking nearly 200 hostages from one place to another. In total, 118,000 residents were affected by the conflict. Damages in infrastructure, social services, and productive sectors (agriculture, tourism, culture, and trade) amounted to US \$75 million.

The Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation (PDRF), a Connecting Business initiative (CBI) Member Network, responded despite having no prior experience in conflict-affected areas. PDRF was able to harness resources to support a national project on rebuilding houses for the displaced families.

The Philippines ranks ninth worldwide among countries that were most negatively impacted by terrorism based on the [Global Terrorism Index released in 2019](#). Terrorism and insurgency are the most significant internal threats in terms of the country's peace and security.

Four years later, in 2017, another fight between government security forces and armed pro-ISIS insurgents erupted in Marawi City. As a result, [as much as 98% of the total population](#) of the city as well as residents of nearby municipalities were forced to flee their homes due to food shortages, damages to infrastructure and economic hardships. While most people have been able to return to their homes, as many as [66,000 Maranaos remain in temporary shelters or with host families](#) around Marawi City and will continue to do so for the coming years.

PDRF was again confronted with the challenge of engaging in a post-conflict response and recovery. In 2017, while the conflict was still ongoing, PDRF committed to supporting the city by sending medical support. Later, the network worked alongside the Government, the United Nations and civil society contributing to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), livelihoods, and education services. [The United Nations Humanitarian Country Team has acknowledged the critical role PDRF played in response and early recovery](#).

## PDRF's approach to conflict sensitivity

When PDRF first started planning their Zamboanga City interventions and identifying how to work in a conflict-affected area, they did not have any prior experience in areas affected by conflict. As a result, they had to plan and execute their approach based purely on Government recommendations. However, in the context of the Marawi siege, having worked through several disasters in the past years, PDRF developed a strategic framework to respond more effectively and efficiently to disasters. While galvanizing resources to help rebuild communities, PDRF's goal is to implement programmes with lasting impact. Therefore, they sent a team of two people to Marawi City to assess the situation and identify critical needs that the local government could not immediately meet. These gaps provided the basis for private sector interventions.

Acknowledging that the context might pose different challenges from those brought by natural hazards, PDRF conducted a limited [Dividers and Connectors Analysis](#) to understand factors that could increase tension or bring people together. By simplifying the framework for analysis, it was easier for PDRF to convince its partners of its use and enable everyone to understand the positive and negative impacts of any planned interventions. For example, by talking to local leaders, they realized that communities were tied by a common religious background, a shared experience of the conflict and a strong desire to recover from it. On the other hand, as the local population lived in clans, any intervention that would not be the same for every clan might easily be considered unfair and lead to tensions.

## Private sector interventions in Marawi City

PDRF served as a focal point, bringing together different stakeholders and leading the implementation of six different projects in Marawi City. While many interventions were carried out immediately following the conflict, PDRF's commitment to support recovery efforts in the area has continued until today.



PDRF installed 50,000-liter water tanks in Marawi City in partnership with Pepsi-Cola Products. Photo: PDRF

PDRF and partners provided **water bottles** to the affected populations, but understanding their undesirable environmental impact, started looking for alternative solutions to provide potable water. Jerrycans were considered, but quickly ruled out as they might not have benefitted the majority of the community - and families had previously fought over other aid supplies. Community members also pointed out that bladder tanks altered the taste of water and would likely not be used. As a result, in 2018, PDRF and Pepsi-Cola Products Philippines Inc. installed 17 **water tanks** in underserved transitional shelter sites and selected elementary schools across Marawi City. PDRF agreed with the local government that the tanks would be owned by the communities and hence could be easily moved if they were to relocate. The tanks still provide more than 300,000 liters of clean water per day, serving over 2,500 families in transitional shelters and over 3,500 students in elementary schools. In October 2021, COVID-19 restrictions allowing, PDRF is planning to build one more water tank that would serve another 1,500 households.

In collaboration with Metro Pacific Water, PDRF mapped out water sources, analyzed existing infrastructure for providing water and outlined options for restoring regular water supply for residents. Understanding that the local community had not previously paid for water services, PDRF acknowledged that privatizing the water supply might be met with apprehension and therefore recommended that the Government continue to provide the service free of charge. [The study](#), conducted over a two-month period, was included in the Bangon Marawi Comprehensive Rehabilitation and Recovery Plan.

On livelihoods recovery, PDRF and partners<sup>1</sup> convened the **Marawi Entrepreneurs' Forum and Job Fair** in July 2018, with over 3,000 jobs – the majority in the hospitality management sector – being offered to Maranaos. Local entrepreneurs and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) benefitted from capacity-building sessions, including in financing and business recovery. The initial contextual analysis conducted by PDRF had highlighted that it would be important to conduct small group discussions with community leaders and representatives to identify appropriate and viable livelihoods opportunities in the area.

*"We are very thankful for the assistance that was given to us because it made us feel that we have already recovered from each of our sufferings. Their act of kindness, in its own way, has helped saved us."*

**Hadja Nor-Asia  
Macapanton, beneficiary of  
the Weaving Hope in  
Marawi project**



The Weaving Hope in Marawi project works with over 100 women. Photo: PDRF

Together with partners,<sup>2</sup> PDRF also focused specifically on providing **livelihood assistance and market access to Maranao women weavers**. Since 2018, over 100 women have been supported through the [Weaving Hope in Marawi project](#) that focused on reviving the traditional Langkit weaving, but also included mentoring and financial literacy sessions. The original project scope focused on providing thread to weavers and buying the final products from them, but business skills were later

<sup>1</sup> Partners include the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), USAID Surge, Coke Star TESDA programme, Go Negosyo and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI)/

<sup>2</sup> Partners include the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, ECHOSI Foundation and USAID.

added when PDRF learned from local leaders and weaving groups that some elements of the project were considered unfair, increasing tensions between groups. For example, a group that had produced less than another group felt exploited as they did not earn as much. Some also considered it unfair that patterns that were more difficult to make and required more thread would be priced higher. Adjusting the project scope eased the tensions and changed the outcomes of the evaluation.

In 2018, an estimated 86,772 school children were displaced due to school closures. To address the situation, PDRF provided **educational support kits** in Marawi City with the support of Project Handclasp Foundation (PHF) and the US-Philippines Society (USPS). PDRF interviewed school leaders and the superintendent of the Department of Education to learn that most students were afraid of returning to school, while others attended school in transitional or temporary learning centers. Selecting evacuation centers and certain elementary schools as the sites for the intervention therefore enabled the partners to reach a more children. The elementary school kit known as the "[School-in-a-Bag](#)" was designed by Smart Communications as a multilingual portable digital classroom facilitating learning in remote areas facing electricity shortages.



*"Getting children back to school, especially in this innovative way, will change the trajectory of these children's lives and help make lasting peace attainable."*

**Rene "Butch" Meily, President, PDRF**

School in a bag: educational kits facilitate learning in remote areas. Photo: PDRF

In 2019, PDRF introduced [Empowering Marawi Youth through Innovation](#), a **programme to identify potential solutions to various challenges and match them with investors**. They asked the youth in the community to identify challenges and brainstorm solutions to them. This approach helped build trust with and ownership among community members and ensured that the resources provided through partners would not be utilized to substitute anything that already existed in the community.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, PDRF has provided personal protective equipment (PPE) to rural health centers in the Province of Lanao del Sur, including Marawi City. They also organized a [training session](#) in September 2021 to help the local government improve its emergency operations and incident command system.

## Challenges encountered

PDRF and its partners faced a number of challenges along the way, including:

1. **Geography.** PDRF and the majority of its member companies and partners are based in the Metro Manila area and had limited operations or even knowledge of Marawi City. This meant that the project team had to travel long distances and set up a satellite office in the region to support operations.
2. **Demographics.** The team had to take into consideration different religious and cultural practices of the Maranaos when designing and implementing the interventions. The private sector needed to be sensitive of stereotyping, but also acknowledge how the intervention might interfere with local practices. For example, the different clans' interests or viewpoints had to be addressed in the project design to prevent misconceptions that one clan would be favored over the other.
3. **Resource and time management.** Integrating a conflict-sensitive approach to post-conflict interventions required more financial and human resources than some private sector partners were initially willing to accept. In addition, a contextual analysis and the related adjustments also slowed down implementation.
4. **Perceptions.** The coordination between the national and local Government (LGU) or organizations based in Metro Manila and those in Mindanao was not entirely seamless. International aid agencies and national efforts were sometimes considered to parachute technical expertise but provide little to no tangible support.

## Lessons learned

Building on the various interventions and related challenges outlined above, four key lessons were identified by PDRF as relevant to the Marawi context but likely also to other private sector entities considering activities in a conflict-affected area:

1. **Simplify when needed.** Various partners were skeptical about the need for and findings of the initial contextual assessment. Some considered it too theoretical. Others hesitated because they did not want to delay implementation. As a result, PDRF decided to avoid using technical terms, use language that was more digestible and connect the importance of conflict sensitivity to the corporate objectives of improving people's lives. They also used a simple framework for analysis that would be easy to use and require less time to complete, yet cover at least the minimum areas to ensure operations would do no harm.
2. **Remain adamant.** Despite initial hesitation from partners, PDRF wanted to integrate the conflict sensitivity / do no harm approach in all of their project interventions. After witnessing some of the findings and recommendations of the initial assessment during implementation, the partners also acknowledged how the approach improved the effectiveness of the interventions. This turned into a domino effect and helped PDRF leverage knowledge from previous projects to improve others, but also raise new funding.
3. **Keep an open mind.** The PDRF team recognized early on that predefined activities implemented elsewhere might not match with the reality on the ground in Marawi City. They

needed to rely on the national and local government as well as other stakeholders for information and insights. Where they did not have the expertise themselves, they found it elsewhere. They talked to affected communities and sought their feedback to understand how their interventions were perceived and what areas should be improved to minimize tensions. Community engagement and ownership were important also for the projects' continuity.

4. **Coordinate among stakeholders and across projects.** While some areas of the projects could potentially be improved from the perspective of conflict sensitivity, the risk of PDRF and its partners fueling tensions in the area has decreased as a result of their approach to assess the initial situation, evaluate progress and adjust operations as needed. Having PDRF as the central point of coordination ensured consistency and helped ensure projects stayed on track.

PDRF and its partners continue to support communities in Marawi City. The diversity and type of their interventions is a testament to how the private sector, through collective action, can support internally displaced communities in a way that truly recognizes local dynamics.



Youth innovators understand the importance of teamwork and creativity during one of PDRF's workshops.  
Photo: PDRF

This case study was produced in partnership with the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation (PDRF). For more information about PDRF, visit [pdf.org](http://pdf.org).

The Connecting Business initiative (Cbi) is dedicated to supporting private sector networks before, during, and after crises. Learn more at [connectingbusiness.org](http://connectingbusiness.org).

Cover photo: A master weaver teaches a project beneficiary how to weave. Photo credit: PDRF.