



SUCCESS STORY

Ex-combatants find good fortune in timely fish delivery



Aquaculture has enabled me to provide for the needs of my family and show that good things come to those who work hard and choose the path of peace.

—Isni Undin

Fish farmer and former combatant

- Beginning in 1997, USAID's GEM Program has helped more than 28,000 MNLF members across Mindanao make the transition from being combatants to being productive growers.

At the crack of dawn, Isni Undin and his men finish loading 100 kilos of live tiger grouper into a motor boat docked alongside Undin's stilt house on the island of Basilan in the Sulu Archipelago.

Undin does a final check to make sure the aerator on the 30-foot boat—a live fish transporter—will supply the groupers with enough oxygen during their four-hour trip to Zamboanga. Using their new transporter, he and the other members of his cooperative of fish growers are making their first direct delivery to a buyer in Zamboanga. Previously, they sold to a local trader. They expect to sell the fish in Zamboanga for \$1,100—about 30% more than they would have received selling to a local trader.

The buyers in Zamboanga need to forward the cargo to Asian markets in as fresh a state as possible. "Having our own transporter means we avoid delays, get the fish to the buyer in good condition, and save on transport costs," says Undin. "This means higher profits for us."

He credits his cooperative's partnership with USAID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program for this new enterprise.

Through its Targeted Commodity Expansion Project, the GEM Program provided Undin's 50-strong group of former rebel fighters, the Tubigan Multi-Purpose Cooperative, with engines to power the fish transporter, as well as a generator and aerator. The boat itself was provided by the cooperative.

It's been a complete turn-around for the co-op members, who as members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) had for years fought government forces in the jungles of Basilan province. The signing of a peace agreement between the government and the MNLF ended that conflict, allowing Undin to return to his family in their remote and impoverished village.

USAID, through its GEM Program, initially provided him and other ex-combatants with training and materials needed to start seaweed farming and get a fresh start in life. Undin and his comrades knew that this assistance would be provided for only two growing cycles, so they worked hard to sustain their production beyond that period.

Then, in 2006, GEM introduced them to higher-value aquaculture, helping them to set up a system of fish cages for growing out grouper sourced from a hatchery. From earnings from this venture, Undin was able to renovate his house, continue to send his children to school, and help fund the improvement of the community's mosque.