

BOOKS FOR JOLO: Access to Books Critical for Education
by Madge Kho

Did you know that the Philippines has one of the highest literacy rates in Asia, estimated at 95%? But the population's access to a wide range of books is still elusive. Of the 96% of children enrolled in primary schools, only about 50% finish secondary school. The remaining 4%, approximately 5 million children who do not attend school work and 2 million of them work in hazardous conditions. We can assume that those who do not finish secondary school end up working as well to help support their families.

The high drop-out rate is a result of the poverty that confronts this country of 87 million. According to Orlando de Guzman, a reporter for NPR Radio, nearly 40% of all Filipinos live in poverty; three-fourths of the poor live in rural areas and 40% of the population works in agriculture. The average annual income per capita is \$1,040.

The statistics for Mindanao and Sulu, the region where the Moro people live, is much worse than the national average. The Moros, the country's Muslim minority makes up about 9% of the population.

Sulu is considered one of the 10 poorest provinces in the country with poverty hovering around 75.7%. For every 10 families, eight are poor. Malnutrition for children under the age of 5 is as high as 48.38%. Life expectancy is 47.7 years.

There is a lack of health services in the area and basic health care needs are barely met. The occupancy rate at the only hospital in Jolo is 153.5% in 2000. One nurse is on duty for every 35 patients and the surgery ward has been limited to gunshot wounds.

Literacy rate is a mere 32.3% compared with the national average of 95%. According to a report by Marites Vitug of the Center for Investigative Reporting, for every 10 children entering elementary school, only two are able to finish.

The island of Jolo is the largest island in the Sulu Archipelago. It was formally integrated into the Philippine Republic in 1946 after being occupied by the U.S. from 1898-1946. The people of Jolo are called Tausug and majority are of the Muslim faith. The town of Jolo is the capital of the Province of Sulu and is located on the island of Jolo. The Sulu Province together with the rest of Mindanao are one of the poorest areas of the Philippines. The poverty has bred despair over the years and generated more frustration towards the central government of the Philippines and spurred armed resistance since 1972.

The town of Jolo was the scene of a fierce battle between rebel forces of the Moro National Liberation Front and the Philippine military in 1974. The town was completely destroyed by bombardment from government troops. Thousands of civilians died from the indiscriminate bombing, homes and schools destroyed. Among those damaged were the libraries in the schools.

The Books for Jolo project attempts to provide educational resources to the people of Jolo. Books will be housed in public libraries (Jolo Public Library, Mindanao State University and the Sulu Provincial Library) and in private institutions like the Notre Dame of Jolo College.

Books and other reading materials are rare in Jolo. Because people cannot afford to buy these materials, stores rarely sell books other than what schools require of their students for their classroom needs. What we in the West take for granted --- accessibility to bookstores, online book outlets, book clubs of all types, used book sales, public libraries, yard & garage & church book sales, private school libraries --are what the people of Jolo hope one day they would have.

Books are empowering tools for everyone. It is vital for the intellectual growth of a people. Growing up in Jolo in the 1960s, I remember, we never had enough books to read. There was no public library at the time. The college library was very small and had books only related to our school work. There was only 1 tiny bookstore that had no more than 10 dozen titles on its shelf. That bookstore is gone now. Books were and continue to be expensive in the Philippines and not affordable to everyone.

You can make a difference. Donate \$10, \$25 towards the shipping cost of books that are being sent by the "Books for Jolo Project" initiated by the Jolo Culture and Historical Society. Thousands of books donated by Massachusetts public libraries are being shipped monthly to Jolo. If you want to help in any other ways, please contact: Madge Kho at Chongga@juno.com. Donations can be sent to: Books for Jolo, c/o Madge Kho, 48 Liberty Avenue, Somerville, MA 02144.