

Davao City: Children First

When you protect the children, you're protecting the whole nation.

During his inaugural speech in June 2004, Davao City Mayor Rodrigo R. Duterte emphasized that *the rights of the child will remain to be at the top of his administration's priorities*. Eleven years later, the City Government of Davao exists as a prime mover in advocating children's rights by providing full access to education, health and nutrition, shelter, safe environment, and protective and rehabilitative services to ensure their holistic growth and development with gender perspective. A promise made is a promise to be fulfilled.

Started with a vision

Davao City envisions its citizens, particularly children, to be God-centered, healthy, empowered, free from abuse and neglect, with full access to services, and living in a peaceful and gender-fair, caring society.

A highly urbanized city, with a population of around 1.5 million (as of 2010), quality of life in Davao City has been recognized as the best in the country. With about 40% of its population as children, Davao City is inspired to prioritize the needs of their future leaders and mobilizers.

The allocation and utilization of resources directed to promote and protect the welfare of children are most vital in the successful implementation of programs, projects, and activities. Davao City's investment for children goes beyond what is set by rules.

In 2014, programs and projects for children and in part beneficial for children have a budget share of 42.60% from the city's internal revenue allotment. Apart from the funds sourced out, there are various collaborative projects pursued through partnerships with non-government organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and civic organizations.

The city guarantees that these cascading and multi-sectoral interventions are implemented by institutionalizing these programs and projects to be part of the Annual Investment Plan. It puts more weight in the preventive programs as it earmarked a generous budget for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Program and Special Education Funds. Infrastructures beneficial for children such as the Crisis Intervention Center for abused female children has been in place since 1994. It was renamed Balay Dangupan in 1996.

The city also prides itself on the strong linkage with non-government, civil societies, and faith-based organizations and other agencies.

Responding to children's needs

The growth in population brought about challenges in the locality as incidence of children needing special protection rose. As of 2014, Davao City Police Office (DCPO) recorded 4,033 reports of children in conflict with the law (CICL) cases where 76 were filed in court. Nonetheless, the sound utilization of resources by the city government warrants that interventions for these children are provided and sustained.

With the enactment of Republic Act (RA) 9344 or the "Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006," the city developed programs to address the issues of CICL. In 2008, it established Lamdag sa Kabataan Home for Boys for the CICL who are awaiting court disposition of their cases or transfer to other agencies or jurisdiction.

In 2013, Children's Village was constructed and with the passage of Republic Act 9344 as amended by Republic Act 10630, otherwise known as "An Act Strengthening the Juvenile Justice System in the Philippines, Creating the Juvenile Justice Welfare Council under the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Appropriating Funds Therefore, and for Other Purposes," it was renamed to Children's Village of Davao City - Bahay Pag-asa to provide short-term residential care for CICL 15 years old and below 18 years old who are awaiting court disposition and jurisdiction.

To lessen their contact with law enforcement officers and lessen the stigma, CICL's cases are immediately assessed by the Quick Response Team for Children's Concerns (QRTCC), a 24/7 inter-agency team. This is an expanded task of QRTCC in relation to RA 9344, as its function is rescue and surveillance in response to reported cases of abuse and other atrocities against children.

Moreover, to strengthen the promotion of services for the children, the city government hired and intensively trained more social workers in order to fulfill a 1:1 ratio of social worker and barangay.

Obstacles turned into triumphs

But not everything runs smoothly as it is hoped to.

The task in attaining the envisioned state of the children is enormous. The city government faces several challenges such as the high turn-over of efficient social workers as they transfer to other agencies, the necessity to train new service providers, social workers not immune from suit, increased number of children needing special protection, and some weak Barangay Councils for the Protection of Children (BCPC).

These challenges only motivate the city government to strengthen its efforts in pursuit of its vision and goals. The Institutional Development and Capacity Plan, a strategic direction of the administration, was designed to address these challenges to address complex issues and concerns affecting the city.

It defines the approaches such as empowerment and participation of its people, strengthen social services, capacitate its human resources and revisit organizational functions, reinvent services for the marginalized sector (the women, elderly, persons with disabilities, and children), develop programs for the enhancement of the capabilities of the BCPCs and utilize the identified Five Child Friendly Barangays as pool of resources for learning hub.

As it moves further in development initiatives, the city is building institutional capacity in forms of programs and projects that will address the increasing demands of its citizenry, especially the children. Their well-being is a result of a collective agreement and public investment.

Children are the most vulnerable citizens in our society. We owe them life free from abuse and neglect, with full access to services, and living in a peaceful and gender-fair, caring society. Davao City remains to be committed in this pursuit for it believes that protecting their children will also protect the city and its way forward.

