

# FEATURE STORIES

## TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN MAGUINDANAO: Harnessing the local pool of talent through skills trainings

June 6, 2012 was a red letter day for Jonell Venancio. He got up bright and chirpy that morning anticipating the afternoon's activities in which he was slated to formally graduate from his training course.

Jonell is just 17 and already intent on getting a job. He prepared himself for the two-hour commute from his hometown of Upi to the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority's (TESDA) regional training center in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao.

Situated in the heartland of Muslim Mindanao in the Southern Philippines, TESDA's training center stands on a sprawling lot dotted with buildings, dormitories, and training facilities. It serves the technical vocational training needs of the denizens of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The training center was home to Jonell and 19 other trainees from February 20 to April 17, 2012. During this period, they completed their training in Automotive Servicing.

Meanwhile, Reinante Pasaporte, a friend and fellow trainee of Jonell, was also set to join the graduation ceremonies that afternoon. 21-year old Reinante is excited about his prospects for a job given that he is already of age and would very much like to earn his keep. He also wants to help his parents and siblings in meeting daily expenses.

Jonell, Reinante, and other disadvantaged

youth like them were supported by the Spanish-funded *MDG Joint Programme on Alternatives to Migration: Decent Jobs for Filipino Youth* which was launched in July 2009 with the objective of increasing young people's chances of landing jobs through technical vocational training, among others. The Joint Programme is implemented by UN Country Team agencies including ILO, IOM, UNICEF and UNFPA as well as local stakeholders from government and civil society.

To date, 500 disadvantaged youth from Maguindanao were given skills training under the labour market-responsive technical vocational skills training component of the Joint Programme. It aims to increase access of young women and men to decent work.

It is worth noting that this component is just one element which is being conducted simultaneously with other components as part of a broader and concerted effort in addressing youth employment. Other components of the Joint Programme include capacity building for local economic development, entrepreneurship training programme for disadvantaged youth and public-private partnerships.

### Hindrances to education

In a country where the magnitude of the poor population is pegged at 23 million people (NSCB, 2009), many young people are not able to continue on to tertiary education and opt instead to work for a living.

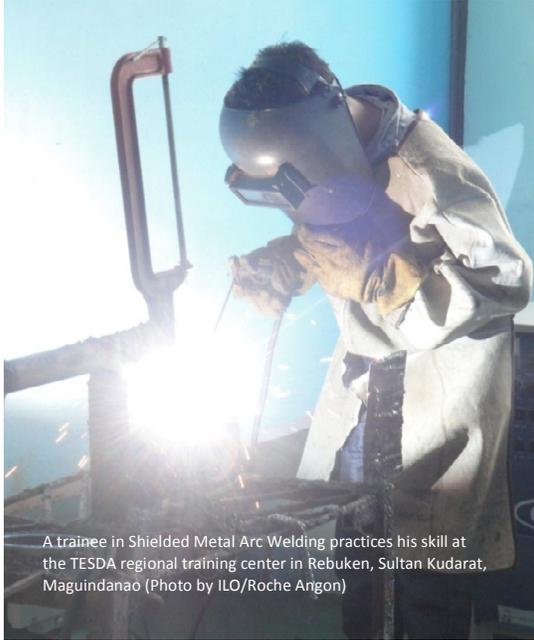
The situation is particularly rife in Maguindanao where youth in conflict-ridden areas are forced by circumstances to drop out of school. Many youth have sought work outside of their villages to help support their families and themselves. In a 2010 ILO study on the entrepreneurial potentials of selected disadvantaged youth in Maguindanao, it was reported that as high as 74.4 per cent of the youth surveyed would like to work outside of their hometown while 67.8 per cent would like to work abroad.

### Work aspirations

Given a choice, Jonell and Reinante both want to join the Philippine Army. The training that they received from TESDA ARMM under the Joint



21-year old Reinante Pasaporte (left) and 17-year old Jonell O. Venancio (right) are two of the trainees in Automotive Servicing supported by the JP YEM (Photo by ILO/ Wilbert San Pedro)



A trainee in Shielded Metal Arc Welding practices his skill at the TESDA regional training center in Rebuken, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao (Photo by ILO/Roche Angon)

Programme is a channel that could help them achieve their dream as the Philippine Army also hires support personnel trained in technical skills to maintain its equipment and vehicles.

Joining the army is a career aspiration shared by many youth from this part of the country. Jonell and Reinante reason out that the prime motive for their choice is the security afforded by a regular job in the Army. Most people in the province work in corn and rice farming, which has its risks. Unpredictable changes in the weather, market conditions, and the peace and order situation affect their livelihood. This may be a reason why there is a premium placed on permanent employment.

### Coexisting in the land of promise

Local history shows that Shariff Muhammad Kabungsuwan who hailed from a neighboring Malay kingdom introduced Islam in the area some time in the 15th century. Marrying into the local nobility, he became the founder of the Sultanate of Maguindanao. His most enduring legacy—the introduction of Islam—has today made Maguindanao one of the few provinces with a



A young woman trainee in Dressmaking at the Ittihadun Nisa Foundation is engrossed in her work (Photo by ILO/Danielle Bagsic)

Muslim majority in a country where most people are Catholic. Catholicism was introduced to the rest of the archipelago by Spanish colonizers in the 16th century.

Well into the 20th century, Mindanao which is the second largest in the Philippine island group was sparsely populated and its fertile soil and vast expanse has earned it the moniker as the land of promise. Mindanao’s bounty became a magnet for migrants from Luzon and the Visayas.

In Maguindanao today, the Muslim majority commingle with local tribes including Christians of Ilocano, Visayan, and Ilonggo descent. Reinante himself is of Ilonggo stock while Jonell belongs to the Tiruray tribe from the town of Upi.

### Training grants for disadvantaged youth

Through the Joint Programme, the International Labour Organization (ILO) partnered with the TESDA ARMM in providing training grants to disadvantaged youth in Maguindanao. Throughout the undertaking, the provincial local government of Maguindanao was a part of the collaboration. Initially, a skills needs assessment was conducted, with the participation of local stakeholders, which took into account the needs of the local labour market.

The following training courses have been selected and offered to disadvantaged youth as labour market-responsive skills in the provinces—Shielded Metal Arc Welding, Carpentry, Masonry, Consumer Electronics Servicing, Automotive Servicing, Electrical Installation and Maintenance, Dressmaking, and Baking and Pastry.

### Expanding training opportunities through local partnerships

One strategy used by TESDA ARMM in expanding the reach of technical vocational training is through partnerships with local training service providers. Two of the more prominent of these local technical vocational institutions (TVIs) are Ittihadun Nisa Foundation Inc and Mamasapano Technical Vocational Education and Training Center (MTVETC).

MTVETC was initiated in 2008 by the local government of Mamasapano in Maguindanao. The center conducts technical vocational training for out-of-school youth and unemployed adults and was initially undertaken in partnership with the Philippines-Canada Local Governance Support Program in ARMM (LGSPA), the Maguindanao provincial office of the TESDA, and other partners.

Aside from equipping out-of-school youth and unemployed adults with skills for employment,



Shown are graduates of training in Electrical Installation and Maintenance at the Mamasapano Technical Vocational Education and Training Center (Photo by ILO/Wilbert San Pedro)

MTVETC’s management says that providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities contribute to building peace in the conflict-affected municipality.

As of 2012, MTVETC has training courses in Electrical Installation and Maintenance, Computer Hardware Servicing, Shielded Metal Arc Welding, Driving, and Computer Literacy (MS Office Application).

Through the TESDA, the Joint Programme sponsored training grants in Building Wiring and Installation for selected trainees enrolled at the MTVETC.

Meanwhile, the Ittihadun Nisa Foundation Inc, another training service provider, caters to the training needs of women including two youths, Chelsianor Kalis and Jamalia Macasolay, who both received training grants from the Joint Programme to train in Baking and Pastry.

Chelsianor’s mother is an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) who—like most OFWs— migrate for work to sustain the financial needs of her family with hopes of a better future for her children. One of the fruits of this sacrifice is to see Chelsianor through school.

However, Chelsianor had to temporarily stop her schooling at the Southern Christian College where she is majoring in Information Technology, due to bad times. The good news is that she will be going back to school, thanks to the remittance her mother would be sending her anytime soon. In the meantime, she did not keep still but, after hearing of a local training being sponsored by the JP YEM, applied for and was accepted to a training course in Baking and Pastry conducted by the Ittihadun Nisa Foundation. With the intent of engaging in a small enterprise using her newfound skill, Chelsianor has high hopes of saving money to help pay for her education.

Jamalia also trained in Baking and Pastry. According to her, this has made her more adept in the art of baking. She is in demand in birthdays and

other family occasions where her baking skills are put to good use.

As exemplified by Chelsianor and Jamalia, young women in Maguindanao tend to be conservative and this is reflected in the trainings that they pursue. Traditionally, Ittihadun Nisa Foundation has provided young women with training courses in baking, pastry production and dressmaking.

However, there are a number of young women who have already broken out of the mold to pursue training in careers that are traditionally seen as male-oriented.

One of these young women is Aramidell Panalangin who is enrolled in a welding course at the MTVETC. Although most of her classmates are male, she is not daunted. This young woman who is just as adept as her male counterparts in handling the blowtorch quips that “what men can do, women can do too.”

When asked why she chose to train in welding, she cites her female friends who have gone on to lucrative jobs abroad armed with a training certificate in welding.

### Next step after graduation: Jobs

Like Jonell and Reinante, whom we met earlier, Chelsianor and Jamalia were part of the contingent of trainees who participated in the graduation rites at TESDA ARMM on the afternoon of June 6, 2012.

The simple graduation ceremony was a symbolic rite of passage. It marked the transition from school to life for most of these youth who have little chance of furthering their schooling due to financial reasons. As can be expected, almost all of the graduates were clamoring for jobs when asked about their next move.

Unfortunately, this is something that the government—through no fault of its own—will not be able to deliver wholesale at this point. The local economy of Maguindanao cannot absorb all available manpower in the formal sector since wage employment opportunities are limited to a few



Chelsianor Kalis (center) and Jamalia Macasolay (right) with their trainer (at left) in Baking and Pastry at the Ittihadun Nisa Foundation in Maguindanao (Photo by ILO/Wilbert San Pedro)

companies the biggest of which are La Frutera and Ardexcor.

Nevertheless, the Joint Programme continues to exert extra effort in facilitating training-employment linkages in collaboration with TESDA ARMM and the provincial government of Maguindanao. In a forum held in Buluan, Maguindanao in March 2012, 28 commitments were solicited from public and private sector partners who signed pledges to provide on-the-job training (OJT), marketing assistance and employment facilitation for the training graduates of the Joint Programme.

The peace and order situation is also a detriment to the growth not only of large industries but of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As a response to the dearth of local jobs, many youths and adults migrate for work to affluent Muslim countries in the Middle East and Malaysia. One hope for creating jobs is promoting entrepreneurship which creates opportunities for self-employment.

### From skills training to jobs

Although Jonell and Reinante did not exactly get paying jobs after their training, they got something which, eventually, could land them regular work. A memorandum of agreement between TESDA ARMM and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) provides 10 to 15 TESDA graduates the opportunity to train on-the-job in the AFP's motor pool section and the two friends had been fortunate enough to be included in this list.

Since June 10, 2012, Jonell and Reinante have been working at the motor pool section of the AFP based in Awang in Cotabato City. This is part of their OJT and it is the perfect opportunity for them to further hone their skill in automotive servicing as helpers to the regular mechanics of the AFP. According to the boys, they are not paid for their effort but are provided with a daily meal at noontime.

More importantly, they are given the assurance that with good performance on their part, they can eventually be absorbed as regular workers of the AFP. This is something that takes them one step forward in achieving their goal. It is also a motivation to sustain them as they hold on to their dream.

### Challenges and lessons learned

The technical vocational skills training component of the Joint Programme is unique in that it targets a minimum of 55 per cent employment rate for its graduates.



JP YEM trainees in Dressmaking during the graduation ceremonies at the TESDA regional training center in Maguindanao (Photo by ILO/Wilbert San Pedro)

To meet this challenge in Maguindanao, TESDA ARMM has to rely on several strategies which include working closely with companies to translate commitments into partnership agreements, job fairs, networking with DOLE and the LGUs for employment facilitation assistance, linking the graduates with TESDA Specialista Technopreneurship Program for self-employment, requiring participating technical vocational institutions (TVIs) to facilitate employment of their graduates as a basis for allotment of scholarship funds, and exploring employment opportunities in neighbouring areas outside of the province.

Through these initiatives, stakeholders are confident that the gains of the project have a good chance of being sustained.

In the end, the Joint Programme showed what could be accomplished if all stakeholders contribute their best to solving the problem of unemployment. Also, it proved that public-private partnerships can deliver results at the local level which ultimately ensure decent work for young people. *✉ Wilbert San Pedro and Roche Angon*

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