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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FOOD SECURITY AND COPING MECHANISMS OF CONFLICT AFFECTED POPULATIONS: A CASE OF NORTHERN SHAN STATE, MYANMAR AND MARAWI, LANA DEL SUR, PHILIPPINES.

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

Food security is the availability of food and one's access to it and a household is considered food secure when its occupants do not live in hunger or fear of starvation (FAO, 2002). Food insecurity therefore is about risks and uncertainty, chronic hunger and poverty. In conflict affected areas like Shan State in Myanmar and Marawi in Lanao del Sur, Philippines, food insecurity and economic instability is high and people, particularly the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), in this war affected areas lived in hunger and fear. IDPs are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border". Constructive and short-term interventions done by humanitarian nongovernmental organizations such as UN World Food Programme, Care and Oxfam in conflict affected areas aims to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity.

The purpose of this paper is to (1) review the literature and explores the food security situations of two conflict affected populations; Shan State in Myanmar and Marawi, Lanao del Sur, Philippines, (2) provide background of the coping mechanisms used by IDPs, (3) compare and contrast the food security situations of the two populations and (4) discuss the various interventions done by humanitarian organizations in the said areas.

Literature and Report Review:-

Background of the Conflict-Affected Populations

Myanmar government army launched offensive operation against Kachin Independence organization (KIO) in June 2011, breaking a 17 years ceasefire agreement is still on- going in both the Kachin and northern Shan state affecting thousands of lives. Fighting sharply escalated in Northern Shan State from the beginning of 2015 to the end of 2017 with coordinated attacks by the Myanmar Democratic Alliance Army, the TNLA, the Arakan Army, and the Kachin Independence Army— formalized as the North Alliance-Burma, which resulted in a dozen civilian and security force casualties, thousands of civilians displaced and mostly were sheltered in monasteries, host communities and existing camps. According to UNOCHA Myanmar, more than 8,000 civilians are currently being sheltered in 27 camps and other unidentified areas in northern Shan state.

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thousands of residents particularly women and children fled to nearby municipalities and cities and in various regions in the country. Eventually, the Philippine government declared Martial Law in the whole island region of Mindanao. The Islamic City of Marawi is the capital and the only city in the province of Lanao del Sur with a population of more than 200,000. People of Marawi are called Maranao and speak the Maranao dialect. After five months, the battle against the terrorists in Marawi had finally ended.

Food Security Situations of IDPs in Shan State and Marawi:-

In Northern Shan State, Myanmar, the overall food security situation is moderately food insecure, with some areas, however, being classified as highly food insecure and majority of the villagers are poor and vulnerable to socio-economic shocks. While in Marawi, Philippines, the assessment of World Food Program (WFP) revealed that 39 percent of assessed populations were found to be moderately to severely food insecure (WFP, 2018). Post-conflict assessment found out that the conflict has not only displaced the people but also many negative impacts on the livelihood and food security. In some case, access to basic food items may be limited after resettlement/return to villages of origin. The same negative impact also occurred in Marawi, Philippines, livelihood, socio-economic conditions and food security situations of IDPs, greatly affected.

Presently, IDPs in the Northern Shan State camps are still heavily reliant on food aid from the government, humanitarian partners and religious organizations. Due to continuous fighting between government and EAOs and limited food availability with low levels of domestic stocks in camps, delivery of food assistance need to be continued. Unlike Northern Shan State battle, the battle against the terrorists in Marawi, Philippines ended within 5 months. After the battle, one-third of the more than 77,000 displaced families have already returned to their barangays (administrative sub-unit) to resume their livelihood (WFP, 2018). But despite the end of the Marawi battle, however, there are still almost 50,000 families displaced that need the immediate provision of food assistance as well as economic opportunities. IDPs in both Shan State and Marawi relied heavily in food assistance by humanitarian organisations. In Shan State, some of households find it difficult to survive their daily food consumption in lean period during July and August and households headed by females with big families have considerably greater food insecurity than male headed households. IDP's that rely on casual labor and marginal income sources from outside of the camps are more food insecure (severe and moderate) than households engaged in farming jobs, livestock breeding, skilled labors and regular income activities.

Coping Mechanisms Used by IDPs:-

According to psychologists Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, coping is the sum of cognitive and behavioural efforts, which are constantly changing, that aim to handle particular demands (Sincero, 2012). Coping is an activity that seek and apply solutions to stressful situations or problems that emerge because of stressors. Coping mechanisms are brought about by a person's conscious minds to positively ward off the stressor or solve the stressful situation.

The coping mechanisms used by IDPs in Northern Shan State households can be categorized according to the reliability and sustainability of income sources (UN-WFP). In general, more than 70% of people who stayed in IDP's camps relied heavily on external food assistance by humanitarian organisations. Among them, severely food insecure households took credit mainly to meet their immediate food needs and health expenses; while food secure and moderately food insecure households are more likely to take credit to buy agricultural inputs, in addition to meeting food and health expenses. Similarly, the UN-WFP in Marawi also reached 198,000 individuals with rice distributions and 60,000 students with emergency schools meals from June 2017 to April 2018. Now in its early recovery phase, WFP continues to reach displaced populations with general distributions of rice and school meals in Marawi.

In Northern Shan State, approximately 5-10% of IDP's population used reduced intake or frequency of meals as a coping mechanism in lean season if they faced difficulties or main shocks in off-farm seasons. As most of the displaced people have farming background and since they had left all their livelihood behind, it is a challenge for them in the long run. In Marawi on the other hand, nearly 80 % of the communities surveyed reported changes in the behaviour of children displaced by the conflict, who more often than not demonstrated negative coping mechanisms. Girls and young women are especially affected, with about a quarter to a third of the communities surveyed reporting incidents of sexual violence, early marriage and negative consequences for survivors of abuse who become known (UNOCHA Philippines, 2017).

Interventions Done by Humanitarian Organizations:-

To give coping mechanism support to the displaced women and children who are at risk, CARE initiated “Family Conversation Sessions”, a form of psychosocial therapy that provided displaced families a safe space to discuss mental, sexual and reproductive health status, and to share their plans and ideas for recovery and rehabilitation of Marawi City. Each day, the session gathered 20 families in evacuation centers, with each family having an average of 6 members, thus each session has estimated 120 individuals participating.

The WFP’ food assistance in Northern Shan State includes the participation of IDPs in the distribution of food ration. The main coping mechanisms mentioned were borrowing food from neighbors and/or relative, purchasing food on credit and reducing the rice portion size (WFP Report, 2015). In Marawi, multi-purpose cash grant assistance were provided to IDPs and host families for food and non-food item needs. Other coping mechanisms interventions include; Shelter repair assistance incorporating the “Build back safer” techniques, Livelihoods recovery assistance for women via conditional cash grants and psychosocial support for IDPs to discuss mental, sexual and reproductive health status.

Concluding Remarks:-

In general, coping mechanism used by IDPs both in Northern Shan State and Marawi were mostly food and cash based. Overall food security situation in Northern Shan State is moderately food insecure, with some areas classified as highly food insecure while in Marawi, most of assessed populations were found to be moderately to severely food insecure. Both populations relied on food and cash assistance. Interventions done by WFP and Care in both conflict affected areas such as food and cash assistance, family conversations and shelter repair assistance provides additional coping support to IDPs in both areas.

About the Author:-

Karen Luz Teves is an associate professor at the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension at Visayas State University in Baybay City, Leyte, Philippines, where she teaches agricultural education, extension, and food science courses. Ms. Teves is an academic extension worker and food technologist in charge of organizing communities and engaging people, developing livelihood programs with focus on food processing and food safety to improve the socio-economic condition of the marginalized sector in the society.

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