On the outer edge of Samar Island, volunteers from Philippine Red Cross help bridge the gap between isolated communities and maternity care. Collaboration with local health stations has increased early detection of pregnancy complications, thereby saving the lives of mothers and infants. 

Barriers to maternity care
Eastern Samar, a province of Samar Island, is one of the poorest in the Philippines. Here, doctors and midwives struggle to meet the needs of their patients in an underfunded health system. If there are complications during pregnancy or birth, women are often too far away from any health facilities.

Living far from a health facility almost killed 32 year old Maryann Pecencio Pajares when she gave birth to her fifth child. When she began to hemorrhage, several men had to carry her over forested mountain trails on a makeshift stretcher in the middle of the night to the nearest rural clinic. But she’d lost so much blood, she needed to travel a further four hours by boat to receive a blood transfusion at a larger facility.
Maryann was lucky to survive but others have been less fortunate. Government figures from 2010 reveal that the maternal mortality rate was 392 per 100,000 births in 21 isolated areas of Samar Island. Aside from access to medical care, there is also a need for health education and awareness on where to call for help.

**Red Cross Action**

With an extensive network of volunteers, Philippine Red Cross was well placed to begin a project to improve maternal, newborn and child health in isolated communities in Eastern Samar.

Red Cross trained volunteers to educate communities about safe motherhood, healthy pregnancies, newborn care, nutrition, immunization, family planning and first aid. Each volunteer was responsible for visiting 30 homes to help spread the word about where to find the nearest available health service, and share their health knowledge throughout the community.

Conducting household visits proved a useful way to monitor pregnant women in the village and the volunteers would alert the midwives with any signs of complications. The volunteers also played a role in addressing misconceptions about health embedded in Filipino culture.

As part of the response, Philippine Red Cross also rehabilitated and equipped village health facilities which had fallen into disrepair and secured government agreement to maintain these facilities and employ necessary staff.

**Achievements**

17,000 people have been reached by the Red Cross volunteers with important health information. Also 11 health care stations, formerly in disrepair, have been reconstructed or upgraded and a midwife now comes once a week to provide maternity care.

Villagers queue long before the midwife arrives. Increasingly more women ask for check-ups when they find out they are pregnant, reducing the risk of complications and emergency referrals. Project statistics already show a decreasing trend in maternal deaths, a doubling of facility based deliveries and a decline in infant deaths.

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**KEY ACTIONS FOR SUCCESS**

- Increasing awareness about and demand for maternal health services through local volunteers reaching out to women in their homes
- Securing government commitment to maintain local health stations with maternal health care services

**LOCAL ACTION, GLOBAL GAINS**

*Breaking barriers, improving women’s health*