

Strengthening Dialogue and Socio-economic Development Amidst Conflict in the Philippines

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1. Many recent surveys of the costs of armed conflict show that the most direct impacts are on fatalities and population displacements, almost exclusively among the non-combatants [Collier, Elliot, Hegre, Hoeffler, Reynal-Querol and Sambanis (2003)]. At the same time, areas where conflict arise has shown to suffer persistent negative economic and social effects as wars destroy productive assets, increase exposure to conditions that increase the risk of disease, injury and death, and decrease the available pool of resources available to finance government's education, health and nutrition programs. The armed conflict in the Philippines has produced staggering numbers of internally-dislocated people, which have been exposed to very poor living conditions; more than 50,000 people in the Bicol Region have been displaced since 1969, according to a one report [Lobrigo, Imperial and Rafer (2005) in this Volume], and more than 800,000 in the island region of Mindanao in the 2000- 2001 period alone [World Bank (2003)]. Additionally conflict has disrupted health and education systems and reduced user access to these services, and increased the burden of the war among the most marginalized households as the conflict affected areas in the country are those in which the poor are located [Busran-Lao (2005) in this volume].
2. Amidst the widespread problems that conflict areas in the country have faced, many communities have organized themselves to create and/or strengthen indigenous mechanisms to ensure the provision of economic and social services to their populace. In other cases, external actors have supported local institutions in order to hasten and support the implementation of development projects and to promote peace and conflict resolution strategies in war-scarred areas. There may be many other examples of communities and organizations that have successfully addressed the issues that are rooted in the lack of peace; and thus the cases referred to here are a small sample of the numerous efforts that have been undertaken in the country.
3. According to Coronel- Ferrer (2005) in this volume, project and program interventions undertaken by civil society organizations in terms of peace-building may be classified according to aims. These are: first, those that *intervene directly in the conflict* such as the prevention of the escalation of violence, strengthening confidence-building and facilitating dialogue and undertaking unarmed protection and prevention; second, those that *address the consequences of violence* such as postwar reconstruction; and lastly, working on the 'social fabric' or those that *ensure that institutional reforms are undertaken* in order to reduce the negative impacts of conflict. In a more loose definition of these categories, these may also apply to the initiatives made by local government units, or even the national government, in the areas that have been destroyed by war.
4. Many civil society organizations have undertaken initiatives that have *strengthened inter-faith dialogue* among Christians and Muslims in their respective communities. The **Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, Inc.**, founded as an organization to enhance Christian-Muslim dialogue particularly in Metro Manila, has focused in enhancing the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Barangay 188, Phase 12, in Tala, Caloocan City, which is home to one of the largest concentration of Muslims in Metro Manila. Friday weekly inter-faith sessions are conducted in the local mosque to discuss personal reflections on community and family life. These weekly sessions has led to the creation of a Muslim-Christian Peacemakers' Association, a local self-help group, and to the construction of communal water facilities in the area.
5. Plans for the construction of a Muslim-Christian community center, implementation of sustainable livelihood projects and the installation of lighting in a common recreation facility are in the pipeline of the Peacemakers' Circle. The foundation also organized workshops for enhancing dialogue between religious groups in June 2004 after a Muslim organizer of a crime-watch organizer was assassinated by unknown assailants led to widespread distrust among members of the two faiths. The foundation also regularly organizes peace-building workshops

among women and youth, and discussion fora among leaders of local churches. Early this year, the group supported the building of a mosque at the Greenhills shopping area, where Muslims own a significant number of shops, after many residents in nearby subdivisions opposed the proposal.

6. The **Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation**, founded by a women's rights and peace advocate, Yasmin Busran-Lao in 1997, has helped to mobilize the Muslim-Christian Women's Interfaith Dialogue in Lanao del Sur and has collaborated with other non-government organization and development groups in order to address issues related to gender, good governance and peace-building in the different areas in the province. These groups had been mobilized as a means for women to understand better their sociopolitical situation and take part in the socio-economic changes needed; and for bridging gaps between women of different ethnic and religious communities in the province. The Foundation also has worked to popularize the Code of Muslim Personal Laws or P.D. 1083 and this has been translated into local dialects, with the Foundation holding regular teaching sessions to help Muslim women understand its implementation.
7. In many areas, peace and development efforts have ensured that many of the *basic needs of communities that have been torn by war and destruction could be addressed*. In the past, residents of barangays caught in the crossfire of conflict and who had evacuated to temporary shelters, did not risk returning to their original areas of abode. Support to evacuees were believed to be better in government-administered shelters and many of the strife-torn areas were physically isolated from political centers and thus constraining delivery of services. But in many recent cases, socio-economic programs have been undertaken in the communities just a few months after the scene of the heaviest fighting with successful results.
8. In **Pikit, Northern Cotabato**, national and local government officials in June 2003 persuaded the return of the residents of Barangay Bangoinged, scene of the heaviest fighting between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the MILF in February of the same year. The barangay was said to be the center of what has been known as the 'Buliok complex,' the training and command center of the MILF in Central Mindanao. Initially, more than 100 residents were persuaded to return under the auspices of the Pikit municipal government and the regional Department of Social Welfare and Development office, which provided psychological debriefing and relief goods to the residents, following national government's declaration of the area around the Buliok complex as a zone of peace in March.
9. Subsequently, the DSWD, with the Gawad Kalinga project of the Couples for Christ Foundation, undertook the 'Bangsamoro Pabahay' project which built 1,030 homes (as of 2004) out of a target 5,491 in the Central Mindanao region, including the area of Pikit. The national government also undertook a peace dialogue program in order to provide venues for discussion among the residents, and the Armed Forces and Moro Islamic Liberation Front combatants. Fr. Bert Layson, parish priest of Pikit, re-established the 'Space for Peace', which allowed war evacuees to return to their areas of residence to rehabilitate their communities; the cessation of hostilities in these areas also allowed other development organizations to provide assistance in these communities. A productivity and skills training center had been built, rehabilitation and construction of municipal roads, reconstruction of seven badly-hit mosques and shelter assistance for 627 families have been provided by the government as well.
10. Development efforts in **Basilan province** had been spurred by a project undertaken by the Christian Children's Fund (CCF), an international development agency, utilizing funds from the United States Agency for International Development, which aimed to improve community health systems, improve tuberculosis control, provide family planning services and strengthen local

governance in 62 barangays in all six municipalities in the province. The project, which started in 2002, has been making a significant impact among the residents in the province; in one municipality alone, more than 3,400 families have received nutrition, education and housing assistance; at the same time, at least 3,000 children have received vitamin supplementation, were dewormed and immunized, and were provided medical-check-ups. The CCF has also been instrumental in providing psychosocial counseling and healing among the war-scarred populace; in May, 2004, it sponsored the sixth Puhmalin Children's Peace Festival which featured talent competitions among the youth and symposia and discussions on peace process.

11. CCF has also partnered with the local Army units in order to retrain soldiers and members of the local paramilitary and deepen their orientation towards peace and rehabilitation work. As a result, the Peace Advocates of Zamboanga, the advocacy group that has helped the CCF in designing the workshops, reported that "the Civilian Action Force Geographical Units (or CAFGU, the local paramilitary) has displayed more peaceable social attitudes (in their orientation towards the civilian populace)... (and have become) effective peace makers and advocates in their respective milieus and social frontlines." By the end of 2005, more than 3,500 CAFGU members would have received such training seminars. Sala'am teams, or military units composed of Muslim members or integrees from the Moro National Liberation Front, have been deployed to conduct literacy sessions, construction of sanitary facilities, repair of school houses, mediation of family feuds, provision of medical first-aid, and other types of reconstruction work in the province.
12. In other cases, the peace and order situation had stabilized occurred because of decisions made by local government leaders. In the **municipality of Lantawan, also in Basilan**, due to the efforts of local government officials, residents are now able socialize and walk in its streets after sundown which did not occur ten years ago. Lantawan Mayor Tahira Ismael, a Muslim, Vice-Mayor Felix Dalugdugan, a Christian, and a multi-ethnic municipal council reopened schools, confiscated illegally parked boats, held office at the municipal hall which previously was used to shelter goats and pigs.
13. In order to rehabilitate farm areas and improve food self-sufficiency in highlands in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the University of Southern Mindanao, with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency and in collaboration with the Philippine Rice Research Institute, has undertaken a program called **Pagkain Para sa Masa for the Mindanao Uplands** (PPsM) which started in 1999. Demonstration farms (called 'bahay kubo' models) for rice farming and backyard gardening have been built in 30 municipalities in the region. Seeds and planting materials are provided to the poorest farmers (some are provided with native chickens or ducks) who are then trained in the demonstration farms on planting and harvesting techniques. Staff in these demonstration farms also provide technical assistance to personnel who manage community-based and school-based plant nurseries; in some cases, officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines have requested the program's assistance in maintaining their nurseries.
14. In 2004 alone, more than 3,837 farmers have benefited from the PPsM. According to the project's 2004 annual report, "the PPsM has played a big role in providing both technical and material assistance in the form of start-up planting materials to farmers in upland communities or those internally displaced by the Mindanao conflict... planting materials distributed include root crops, rice, corn and assorted vegetables as well as start-up breeder ducks to qualified beneficiaries. This way, thousands of families especially in the war-affected areas in Mindanao had something to start with for them to generate sufficient food as well as source of income."

15. The United Nations Development Program has assisted in the strengthening peace and development in Mindanao through the implementation of a **Multi-Donor Programme** which began in 1997. Now in its third phase (known by its acronym, UN MDP3), the program is implemented utilizing a post-conflict strategy involving the convergence of UN and government services in so-called Peace and Development Communities (PDC). The program has three key outcomes: improved capacities of target communities in partnership with their local governments for self-sustaining development and improved access to basic services; strengthened institutional support mechanisms to promote collaboration and enhance coordination for continuing support to peace and development; and creating a positive environment of mutual trust and confidence among the peoples and institutions leading to lasting peace.
16. One such PDC is **Barangay Manili in Carmen, North Cotabato**, where 76 Maguindanaon villagers died when armed men sprayed gunfire and lobbed grenades during Saturday prayers in June 1971. Until thirty years after the incident, residents in the barangay would flee the area whenever fighting between government forces and the Moro National Liberation Front would intensify in nearby barangays. In 2000, when the government declared an all-out campaign against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, armed groups destroyed a significant amount of infrastructure in the barangay including the local mosque. In 2002, the UN MDP3 helped in developing a five-year Barangay Development Plan, which attracted support from donors in building core shelter and potable water systems and in undertaking livelihood training, sustainable agriculture and seed dispersal programs in the community. The participation of the local government, military and the non-government organizations have bolstered confidence among residence that development in the barangay would be sustained. According to the municipal vice-mayor, "People's lives have improved... at least, most of them have managed to afford television sets."
17. In July 2003, the **Bohol provincial government** and local leaders re-activated the Bohol Peace Forum, a multi-sectoral network chaired by the diocesan bishop in order to revitalize the discussion of the peace agenda with local communities and non-government organizations and to explore avenues for undertaking peace talks with the local units of the New People's Army. The peace forum was originally created in 1999 and had been responsible for targeting 10 conflict-affected barangays for development assistance in 2001.
18. In order to spur development efforts in the Bohol, the provincial government created the Poverty Reduction Management Office in order to manage and hasten delivery of programs and projects being targeted in priority barangays, most of which are areas where armed skirmishes between the military and communist insurgents occurred. The aim of the provincial government is to remove Bohol in the list of the 20 poorest provinces by 2010 and, in line with the Millennium Development Goals, to reduce poverty incidence by half (to an estimated 28 percent) by 2015 by spurring development efforts in the poorest areas of the province. Major national and donor agencies have coordinated their assistance in these selected areas, while local programs include those relating to drug purchase subsidies, employment assistance and facilitation, scholarship programs, and improvement of school and daycare facilities had been implemented. Because of the improved peace and development efforts conducted in the community, the number of armed insurgents has been estimated by the provincial government to be significantly reduced from 283 in 2001 to 64 in 2004.
19. A significant number of efforts have been on working on *strengthening local institutions and training local leaders* to ensure that the needs of the populace could be addressed. Training seminars were provided to local chief executives to improve the level of governance in these conflict areas. Ensuring that community leaders and representatives of non-government

organizations were represented in barangay councils encouraged greater local participation of the populace.

20. In 2001, the mayors of the municipalities of Buldon, Matanog and Barira in Maguindanao province formed the **Iranun Development Council**. The Iranuns, who preceded the arrival of Maranaws and Maguindanaons, are an indigenous ethno-linguistic group of Filipinos who had converted to Islam and who form the majority of the population in these municipalities. It is also in these municipalities that the MILF set up their central command and headquarters called Camp Abubakar until this area were taken over by the government forces. This inter-local planning body was supported by a local NGO, the Institute of Strategic Initiatives (ISI), with the support of a Manila-based NGO involved in local governance reform, the Institute for Politics and Governance. The ISI undertook social preparation activities in 2001 and 2002, training local facilitators to undertake local development planning activities in the 34 barangays that covered the three municipalities. Around 170 community organizations, comprising the women, youth, government workers (i.e., teachers) and farmers were organized. These local organizations used their influence in the IDC to participate in the discussions in the local development councils of the three municipalities.
21. In 2003, the IDC started to implement a Sustainable Integrated Area Development Program, utilizing the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan anti-poverty approach undertaken by the national government, and was able to garner more than P 100 million in project commitments during a donor's forum it undertook that year; the Department of Agriculture alone had planned more than P 50 million in projects (currently, there is a backlog of P 23 million in projects). One of the crucial development activities that the DA supported has been the construction of farm to market roads and warehouses that spurred the marketing of local crops to other areas; agricultural production have reported to increase by as much as 1200 percent due to improved delivery of farm inputs and better transport of crops. By 2005, more than 70 community organizations continued to exist in order to improve the welfare of the members of the community, especially in Barira, and the barangay and municipal governments have become more pro-active in responding to the development needs of their respective constituencies. The remaining organizations have planned to coalesce into the Iranun People's Organizations Assembly to further spur development efforts in their areas. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in several of her speeches, has recognized the work undertaken in the three municipalities and the recognition of local efforts by national government leaders have made the military units deployed in these areas less wary of development efforts in the area.
22. **Pagtabangan BaSulTa** is a joint effort of ten non-government organizations, foundations and aid agencies to engage and support local leaders and multi-sectoral constituencies in the provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi, and to assist in the development of sustainable interventions to address the problem of poverty, conflict and marginalization in the region. *Pagtabangan BaSulTa* was borne out of a series of discussions, which started in July 2004, to spur development efforts in the three most marginalized provinces in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The coalition's aim is to help bring the human development index of the three provinces at par with the rest of Mindanao by 2010.
23. The consortium's engagement process is based on the premise that only when responsible leaders and citizens engage institutions to be more responsive and provide the needed development opportunities in the region can human security be achieved. The work of the consortium will address the issues of Education, Water and Health, Livelihood, Environment, Governance and Participation and Culture of Peace. The consortium has engaged different stakeholders, including national and local governments, donors, civil society groups, business, armed groups and

traditional leaders, in planning peace and development activities in the three provinces. At the provincial level and municipal level, civil society convenors participate in planning and implementation of the executive-legislative agenda (ELA) for the province or municipality.

24. In its first months of operation, the consortium has committed more than 100 million pesos to various development projects in the area. Additional resources are being mobilized to ensure that the priority programs are implemented accordingly. An additional 150 local leaders are being trained to lead consultation processes in their respective communities and capacity-building activities are being planned in order to assist in the implementation of development programs.
25. These cases provide a glimpse of the numerous efforts that have been undertaken to strengthen dialogue, widen socio-economic development efforts and providing opportunities for political transformation in the midst of violence. These also illustrate the strength and resiliency of local communities in ensuring that, with a modicum of external assistance, they can overcome the cycle of conflict and maldevelopment.

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