



## **EROPA SEMINAR 2008**

**“Governance in a Triptych:  
Environment, Migration, Peace and Order”**  
*23-25 October 2008  
Manila, Philippines*

# **CITIZENS’ NARRATIVE ON PEACE GOVERNANCE IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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### **A Challenged Peace and an Orthodox Solution**

Anti-insurgency is a major rationale presented by the government for continued militarization and the continual labeling of political movements as nothing more than fronts for armed movements. Ultimately though, such high-handed tactic appears as a let down in the medium and long-term since it fails to address the challenges being raised and such approach even more attracts sympathizers to armed struggle. Certainly, the war against insurgents and what has been labeled as “dissident-terrorists” does not warrant peace; on the contrary, war further sows war.

In Mindanao, the southern part of the Philippines, the picture is especially complex due to the configuration of different armed elements. Besides the New People’s Army there are other major formations such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) including a number of ‘lost commands’ with varying degrees of autonomy from the political and military command of the formal MILF structures, the Abu Sayyaf which seems to be a confederation of clans and fundamentalist formations with a combination of financial and political motives, the armed units of the *Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Mindanao* (RPMM) or the Revolutionary Party of Workers in Mindanao; the recently revived *Ilagas (Rats)* and the various paramilitary and criminal armed groups with specific territorial areas of activity and influence.

In areas where such groups operate, civilians and civil society actors are considerably constrained to pursue normal activities.

Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) was a signed agreement referred to as Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL). “Through this agreement, both sides affirmed that they will respect and apply fundamental principles and standards enshrined

within international human rights laws including the right to life, the right to due process of law and the right to freedom of thought and political beliefs and within international humanitarian law, including protection and humane treatment of civilians and combatants not participating directly in the conflict and prohibition on the use of child soldiers” (Amnesty International 15 August 2006).

Each side established its own monitoring committees, but the joint committee never met and the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees has been suspended by the government following the withdrawal of the NDF from the peace negotiations. Many hold the view that negotiations between the GRP and the NDF have not generally been regarded as a serious attempt to arrive at peaceful resolution and that this perception has also overshadowed the significance given to CARHRIHL.(Co in “Breaking Through. Political Space for Advocacy in Southeast Asia”, Joel Paredes, et al. eds. 2007) Meanwhile, abuses by both parties to the agreement continue to be reported.

Similarly, in the General Framework for the Resumption of GRP-MILF Peace Talks dated March 24, 2001, the GRP and the MILF committed themselves to pursue the peace negotiations on the substantive issues until a negotiated political settlement is reached. Both parties also affirmed their commitment to protect and respect human rights in accordance with the principles set forth in the United Nations on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; committed themselves to honor, respect and implement all past and agreements relating to the peace process; commit themselves to negotiate with sincerity and mutual trust, justice and freedom, and respect for the identity, culture and aspirations of all people of Mindanao; and pledged to refrain from the use or threat of force to attain undue advantage while peace negotiations on the substantive issues are going on. An International Monitoring Team (IMT) of peace monitors was deployed in conflict affected areas in Mindanao since 2004 pursuant to the provisions of Terms of Reference (TOR) of the IMT forged between the GRP and the MILF as well as the Government of Malaysia dated September 8, 2004. Despite these, skirmishes between the parties occurred and at present because of the rejection of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), peace negotiations are put on hold. The insistence of the GRP to apprehend an MILF lost command on one hand, and the insistence of the MILF to subject the lost command under their justice system on the other, has exacerbated the situation. Today, the continued military operations against the MILF lost command and rejection of the MOA-AD led to the refusal of the MILF to resume peace talks with the government.

For one thing, the militarist approach adopted by the administration is a classic example of the insistence upon a military-dominated peace as a precondition for development rather than upon development as a necessary activity in a process of peace-building. Could such military-dominated peace sustain development?

### **Conflict and the Bitter Pill of Armed Solution**

*“Residents of Manaulanan and Lagunde in the town of Pikit in North Cotabato knew that trouble was coming when soldiers entered their village on March 20, 2002. Sent to hunt down men who had earlier ambushed three paramilitary troopers, the soldiers saw their suspects and fired immediately. When the gunfire subsided, a woman from the village lay dead, and so were a cow and a carabao. The suspects escaped. When the news spread, people from all over fled and sought temporary shelters in sitios farther away such as Bualan, Tapundok, Pamalian and Idsap. Over 3,000 villagers abandoned their communities after the incident, returning only after the soldiers had left.” (Rebuilding Communities, Balay Rehabilitation Center and KIOS Finland, February 2005)*

The raid in this town of Pikit, province of North Cotabato in Southern Philippines is one of the countless armed encounters that occurred in the province and the rest of Mindanao in southern Philippines. Just this August 2008 after the collapse of the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on Ancestral Domain between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), arms and bullets crossed between the government troops and the MILF forces, driving communities away, abandoning normal lives, and leaving hundreds of civilians either dead or homeless. The fighting persists and civilians continue to lead abnormal lives.

On March 16, 2000 then President Joseph Estrada declared an all out war against the MILF in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. About one million people were displaced and hundreds of houses were burned in this war. Numerous human rights violations against innocent civilians were reported and billions of pesos worth of government and private properties were destroyed including power lines and bridges. Many civilians affected by this war were forced to abandon

their homes displacing them in the cities of General Santos, Davao and even as far as Cebu and Metro Manila.

In 2003, a major war erupted between the military and the MILF in the so-called Buliok military complex in North Cotabato. More than half of Pikit's population fled to other town centers. The ferocious fighting spread to six other provinces namely, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, South Cotabato, Lanao Sur, Lanao Norte, and Zamboanga del Norte. Despite intermittent declaration of truce, the skirmishes went on.

### **The Cause of Dislocation**

The leading cause of displacement due to conflict are the military operations against insurgents and the MILF. Arms used in the conflict are not limited to small bore guns. In the major offensives, howitzer and mortar shelling, and aerial bombing are standard fares. Forced evacuations are used to remove civilians in harm's way and hamleting is used to prevent civilians from giving support to the insurgents. Farmlands become battlefields and homes turn into protective covers for the combatants. The tactics used by the parties to the conflict displace civilians from their homes and livelihood.

Today, the MILF is considered as the most significant armed opposition in Mindanao. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) had abandoned armed struggle in 1996 when it entered into a peace agreement with the government under then President Fidel Ramos though there remains a few who felt betrayed by the MNLF leadership and entered into a tactical alliance with the MILF.

The armed conflict may be rooted in Mindanao's history of colonization and the fight for autonomy and independence and this fight has not ceased since then. Bangsamoro nationhood was revived in the seventies resulting in widespread violent confrontations between the government and the then MNLF. The conflicts in the early seventies were made an excuse for the declaration of martial law by then Pres. Ferdinand Marcos.

Mindanao, the second largest island of the country, is inhabited by Muslims and other ethnic groups. It is the base of the MILF that continues to fight for autonomy. Besides the MILF, other

groups with which the Philippine government troops engage are the New People's Army, and groups such as the Abu Sayyaf which are also engaged in organized crime, kidnapping and other terrorist acts.

The violent conflicts make delivery of basic services difficult. Death and destruction of properties are continuous threats to those providing and receiving the services, affecting their mental health and their ability to return to normal way of lives. These conflicts exacerbate poverty, further deepening its cycle. The widespread violence and lawlessness associated with conflict areas makes them high investment risks thus affecting their ability to muster national resources and build public trust. More than this, violent conflicts are a serious obstacle to investment flows to the area and into the country as a whole.

Although lines are drawn between these groups, the civilians are put in harm's way, are displaced and they become part of the so-called "collateral damage" as civilians are directly in the line of fire. The gross consequence of such conflict is certainly bitter: peace is elusive with not a few civilians perennially uprooted and dislocated, economic activities are abnormal and economy is on a downhill, and most of all, lives and limbs are sacrificed. Since late 1990, non-government organizations and the churches estimate the displaced persons to be around 2 million Filipinos, and within Southeast Asia, the Philippines ranks third as the country with the most numerous displaced people, next to Burma and Indonesia.

### **Micro and Meso level Experiences in Seeking Peace**

The challenge that the people of Mindanao faces still remains. Living in peace in a community free from threat of violence has eluded Mindanao for decades. Violent conflict there is associated with the use of military operations force as a means to an end.

Much of the violence in Mindanao stems from a misunderstood social order which some say is rooted in history and others say may be viewed from the oppression by the government. The conflict is not limited to difference in ideology and policy but includes religion as well.

With the conflict caused by many factors leading to numerous consequences, a multi-faceted, multi-level approach is necessary in resolving the problem. Various alternatives may therefore be adopted.

Interesting intervention strategies in Mindanao conflict areas involve ordinary citizens in a multi-ethnic approach to local community peace building measures. Interventions are described by local observers and the communities as: 1) horizontal, or an approach focusing on addressing current issues), or 2) vertical, focusing on addressing issues of prevention and the continued participation in the peace process.

### The Initial Interventions

The horizontal approach to peace building responds to the visible impact of violence such as displacement made on infrastructure, fields, production, and social network. This dislocation also brings some invisible impact of the war and conflict such as social discord, lowered sense of personal and collective dignity, psychological and emotional stress, and biases and misunderstanding. Both the visible and invisible impacts of dislocation are addressed by the citizens and supportive non-government organizations.

For example, non-governmental groups establish contact with influential persons of authority such as Muslim *imam*, Christian priests, indigenous clan or tribal leaders, traditional village leaders and local authorities. In some areas, non-governmental groups directly contact the community especially at the height of the evacuation. Evacuees are encouraged to organize themselves to facilitate relief operations and extension of medical assistance. The victims themselves are organized to form committees that would assist in cooking and feeding and in preparing supplemental meals for children. The management of evacuation centers is not only done by an intervening non-governmental organization but also by members of the displaced communities themselves. The non-governmental organization ensures that communities themselves are centrally involved in all these activities.

Psychosocial experts from non governmental organizations conduct therapeutic play activities and art sessions especially for children. These activities disperse fear and reduce anxiety or

grief. In some cases and if materials could afford it, temporary educators set up makeshift classrooms and proceed with basic literacy classes.

To reduce stress among adults, talk-therapy activities are organized. In some cases, the victims themselves particularly their leaders are part of the team that negotiates with the authorities and the military for their safe return to their abode as soon as the fighting subsides.

An analysis of the situation and a rapid appraisal of the needs are conducted to assess the displacement situation. In this so-called community diagnosis, the community members and displaced people themselves learn to identify the positive behaviors and identify a range of the local capacities from their social environment, their own culture and values, and their human capacity to adapt to the emergency and crisis situation and to rebuild themselves.

With the guidance of non-governmental groups, the community members themselves participate in the planning to heal the aftermath of conflicts where the process includes a discernment of what had happened. Feelings and thoughts about the violence are shared with other community members.

### **The Continuing Phase of Reparation**

The community members and the non-governmental groups together identify the specific steps to implement the plans, the structures that best suit their vision and design, and the organizations and the key people who would be involved. In doing so, the community voluntarily mobilizes themselves and their partners. The plans also include the negotiation with government authorities and the parties in conflict to attend to their rehabilitation and the peace building efforts.

The important role of non-governmental groups that assist these communities is in the monitoring and evaluation of their plans and the system, including the setting of indicators they agree on to track their progress.

## **Peace building Activities**

The accompanying goals of peace governance are multiple : 1) the psychosocial rehabilitation of the person, family or community, 2) the reduction of stigma and biases, 3) the improvement of the person's social competence to deal with those differently able, 4) the creation of a long-term system of social support, and 5) the improvement of the conditions that prevent violence. Violence whether psychosocial or physical, leads to distress, trauma, and loss of esteem and certainly these are what peace governance aims to address.

Through the facilitation of non-governmental groups, the communities agree on a number of activities such as:

- 1) building peace camps
- 2) mustering educational assistance and support for children and youth
- 3) conducting seminars on human rights
- 4) making psychosocial seminars available for those who were traumatized by conflicts and who need individual attention
- 5) restoring farming activities among adults

Measures to build peace among communities and within the individuals and paying attention to those traumatized help civilians go back to normal lives. However, these activities which require some resources compel non-governmental groups to seek assistance and to mobilize resources from volunteers, other service providers including the churches, local authorities and other non-governmental organizations.

### **Peace Camps**

The peace camps are a place to sort out differences among participants and reduce biases among each other through daily interaction. Living a life together within the camp enables participants to tolerate their differences in cultural values and practices. In other context and countries, tolerance for those who are different is part of "citizenship building". Individuals respect each other's differences, way of thinking, behavior, and values. Toward the end of the camp, participants are encouraged to build organizations of mixed cultural groups and

backgrounds and participants emerge as peace advocates themselves. The peace camps also help train participants to build a network of self-help groups as they go back to the community.

### Self-help Economic Support

These self-help groups are encouraged to build various forms of productive yet cooperative undertakings such as livelihood associations or mutual help associations for two reasons, firstly, to strengthen their capacity to help themselves and reduce reliance on outside support, and secondly, to build a community or group of people who have different ethnic or religious backgrounds yet are able to work together. The idea of self-help economic support is fascinating both for profitable reason and for sustaining peace.

### Policy Support

Community leaders and peace advocates bond to speak out and represent the community in raising the concerns of displaced people at the provincial and regional levels. Dialogues are also encouraged at the national level although these are rarely done. The leaders and peace advocates raise their concerns and demands for resolving conflicts and promoting peace through dialogues with government authorities. They also raise their concerns for protection of civilians and of human rights.

The Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) is an example of an institution created through policy support. It derives its authority from the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of June 22, 2001. It is mandated to determine, lead and manage relief, rehabilitation and development programs in the conflict-affected areas in the Mindanao. Welfare needs of victims are articulated to the BDA thus facilitating their rehabilitation.

### The Space for Peace

In Pikit, North Cotabato, there are pockets of communities which are declared “space for peace”, an area where, when Muslim rebels and Christian military forces enter or invade, the community elders negotiate with these armed groups and ask them to refrain from using force at

least within that space or territory. The 'space for peace' is not only a geographical place but also an emotional haven where community members can come to a dialogue among each other and thereby bridge any misunderstanding, resolve differences, and construct appropriate ways to deal with their differences.

In the 'space for peace' there are psychosocial activities which take place among those traumatized by conflicts. The rebuilding of relationships and the social healing are done through traditional rituals of peace among Muslims, Christian settlers, and the *lumad* or the non-Islamized groups.

Put together these approaches and activities powerfully assemble communities and assisting groups to make peace work and in the process they themselves turn out to be peace governors without high level authorities and power and with no high-powered arms.

### **Drawing Lessons from the Ground : Citizenship and Peace Governance**

Citizenship like democracy, has many meanings and like eating vegetables, citizen participation is always good as a principle and no one is going to go against it. Citizenship and citizenship building are well regarded and applauded. Citizenship has many dimensions depending on the context: in South Africa citizenship may mean an active fight against racism, in Brazil and other Latin American countries, citizenship may mean citizens actively engaging local authorities in the planning and budgeting for development projects. Citizenship is also beyond obligations such as voting in an election – it may mean picking up responsibilities and assuming certain roles in the day-to-day challenges and problems such as being concerned about others particularly the disadvantaged, or promoting human rights, or mediating conflict, or participating in community or national affairs, or monitoring powerful interests or knowing how to make demands. Thus, citizenship is about engaging in public affairs.

Citizenship has its origins in the West in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but as it travels, citizenship continues to take shape and assume different dimensions all over the world. It may be *civil citizenship*, which refers to the rights and responsibilities necessary for the right to free speech and assembly, property rights, and equal rights before the law (T.H. Marshall, 1973). Or it may be *political citizenship*, the right and responsibility to participate in the exercise of political power, or

it may be *social citizenship* which is about the rights and responsibilities that arise from the fight against growing inequities and focus on minimum rights and standards of economic, cultural and social well-being including the efforts of disadvantaged groups to gain legitimacy.

In the context of Mindanao, citizens themselves take the initiative to emerge from the rubbles of conflict and through their own efforts, achieve their social well being. They take up the responsibility to seek peace amidst the armed conflict especially where and when leaders who are distant from the communities, deal with war thru war.

### Citizenry at the Core of Peace Governance

As one can see, the peace process at the level of the citizenry, is one that entails survival, recovery, rehabilitation, and the continuing development of the community and the members who are affected by conflict. In all these activities, the communities and non-governmental groups – the citizens – are the core peace promoters and also the governors of peace. The interaction point between the citizens and authorities is mostly at the local level where the former seeks the latter's cooperation in support in some phases of the peace process, or occasionally, citizens reach out to the national level to register messages of support for peace. Besides such interchange, the centre of peace campaign and advocacy lies with the citizens. Citizens no matter how different in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity, values and training are able to rise above such asymmetries because they engage in what Jurgen Habermas calls "communicative action". Communicative action involves continuing engagement to communicate among those who are not necessarily on similar thought line and beliefs. The narrative of peace in Mindanao also tells of citizenship-building where citizens assume the main responsibilities for promoting and achieving peace and reducing conflicts. Although the local authorities support such initiatives and national level authorities are rarely engaged, the citizens are certainly at the forefront of the peace narrative.

## Governance as Employed by Citizens

Just like a project that requires effective governance, these stages and approaches are assessed, monitored, and evaluated by the community through the assistance of non-governmental groups whose personnel and volunteers are also quite exposed to the realities in the community. With peace as the ultimate goal, the governance of peace also involves a comprehensive process that resolves emotional, mental, and behavioral effects of a traumatic event, and on the contrary, brings out the competencies of the individuals to harness resources and cope with the changes.

A Bangsamoro People's Consultative Assembly (BPCA) had been organized several times. Its primary aim is to gather Bangsamoro Civil Society organizations in order to pursue the demand for a separate nation state through peaceful negotiated political settlement through the conduct of a referendum as a win-win option for the parties. Unlike the MILF and the MNLF, the BPCA sees armed struggle as a last resort. As such, it enjoys the support of members of the academe, non-government and peoples' organizations, and individuals who are in favor of peaceful settlement of the Mindanao conflict. Unfortunately, the voices of those who favor a peaceful resolution of the problem are usually muted by the armed confrontations.

The community leaders and the supporting non-governmental groups seek out the assistance of the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the higher authorities in province or region, as they wish to sustain and expand the development efforts especially assistance for continuing education and health services that require more complex support and facilities.

A sustained governance eventually develops a culture of peace. This experience and the culture of peace have been replicated in other areas of Mindanao such as in Sultan Kudarat in Maguindanao and in Bianan in South Cotabato.

Peace governance also requires tracking the changes, monitoring the results, and drawing lessons from the experiences.

The community assesses the experience by gathering the baseline data collected at the start of the activity. Through a discerning process, the community assesses what was attained and

what was not, and identifies the factors that were helpful and unhelpful and that which affected the outcomes of their plan and the project.

Through the non-governmental organization's assistance, a monitoring and evaluation is done using a reporting system and forms that contain data and information. The impact and contributions of the project are established. On the part of the NGO, the psychosocial workers and volunteers are the researchers who gather all the feedbacks on any changes that have occurred on the community practices, learning, relationships, competencies, needs, beliefs, disposition and attitudes. Toward the end, the assessment and evaluation also help gather the needs or assistance that the communities might need from government and private groups toward full development. As one can see, the governance style adopted by citizens is one that balances methodical, practical, as well as humanistic approaches.

In the context of such peace governance it is central to ask where the police locate itself? This paper envisages that as a peace keeping force under a civilian authority, police forces should not be aligned with armed forces to quell war by war, rather, this paper argues that police should align with the citizenry and the local civilian authorities to promote peace and devote efforts to civilian initiatives that further the cause of peace. The Philippine police is generally oriented toward the military even in its training. That raises an interesting question to our policy makers and authorities with regard to the locus and focus of the police forces.

## **Conclusion and Some Challenges for the Future**

The way to lasting concord is not anymore a militarist-dominated peace. The militarist approach seems stale and unresponsive to peace. The militarist approach has not only put civilians in harm's way, but it also expands the military force as the tactic draws in the police forces and para-military groups in the campaign to quell armed groups. The absence of war that is temporary and short term is measured in terms of the strength and power of arms, ammunitions and other war materiel, however, such high-handed tactics obviously do not work because if they do, there would have long been uninterrupted peace in Mindanao. Such militarist approach indeed requires a re-thinking by policymakers and leaders and a second thought regarding how civilian authorities might be optimized to become peace governors. Ironically, police forces who are peace-keeping civilian authorities by the nature of their mandate have been oriented to a

military approach which is counterproductive to peace. It is interesting to probe into the trauma that war brings upon military people themselves and the psychosocial consequences on them and their families brought by conflict. A thoughtful program should be done on that front soon.

This paper envisages that citizens have more to throw in and they do play a central role in promoting peace and untangling conflict. Citizenship is the paradigm of peace governance. It is quite possible to achieve peace and to dissuade conflict without the use of male-dominated war games. In other context such as in Costa Rica, citizenship and civic service have shown exemplary experiences in sustaining peace and development through what Robert Putnam calls “bridging” and “bonding”. “Bonding” means enhancing the connection among those who think similarly, and “bridging” is reaching out to those who think differently. In fact, armed forces do not exist in that country and no budget is allocated for national defense. In place of armed forces and defense, budget is expanded for health, education, and other social services. Peace governance ala- Costa Rica may not be the ideal or the benchmark; however, this paper argues that peace governance is centrally about citizenship and that the promotion of peace is based on the citizenry.

For peace governance to be strategic and sustainable, the way forward and the investments are clearly in the citizens and in programs and activities that effectively promote peace especially at the local level. As the testimonies in this paper illustrate, even the immediate and short-term response to conflict could be effectively laid out by citizens and other cooperators of local peace initiatives. No arms, no generals.

Citizenship is a potent narrative on peace and development. Citizenship also neutralizes many asymmetries where these exist- asymmetries in values, thinking, culture, historical experience, and religion. However, through citizenship asymmetries could be toned down and differences could be tolerated.

In Mindanao’s narrative of peace, citizens require capacities to empower themselves. It requires them to learn to organize themselves as a community, to develop their skills for reflection and critical thinking and become aware of their differences as individuals and as community, to develop their skills for harnessing local resources and tapping support from other members of the network including the authorities, and to develop their capacity to plan, monitor and keep track of the progress of their work. Fostering citizens’ knowledge and critical consciousness and

changing the relationships within the community, education and analysis, and promoting indigenous leadership and organizing all constitute citizenship and citizenship building – the new weave of power.

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