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A critical partnership

civil society & the peace process

Introduction

Peace is a collective concern requiring the efforts of all society. In the Mindanao peace process, while government and civil society organisations shared the concern to achieve peace, government initiatives have virtually excluded civil society. The official peace process which paved the way for the signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) involved only a few members of Mindanao's influential civil society groups.

The Peace Agreement was a significant step in a long process. It provided for a phased transition to greater autonomy whose final terms would eventually be subjected to congressional debate and a plebiscite. It could thus be expected to offer further opportunities for input from civil society sectors. Their virtual exclusion from the official peace process is one of the main reasons for the opposition to the creation of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). The SPCPD, created through presidential Executive Order (EO) 371, is supposed to oversee development programmes in the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD). In some key areas in Mindanao open opposition and even mass protests greeted government initiatives after the Peace Agreement was signed.

Some sectors, however, expressed support for the peace process and welcomed the creation of the SPCPD as a significant step towards peace. But while they expressed support and willingness to collaborate in peace and development efforts in Mindanao, they wanted to assert their freedom to criticise government actions when necessary. For these groups, some kind of a 'critical partnership' for peace and development is possible, especially if it helps marginalised people.

Mindanao civil society: an overview

Like its national counterpart, civil society in Mindanao is a complicated terrain of networks, coalitions and political alignments. Varying orientations and interests compete for popular attention, loyalty and sources of funding. The inherent tensions among some of

A tradition of activism: peace demonstration in the 1980s

Source: Philippines Resource Centre

these groups are rooted in their divergent political orientations. At times they explode in what the non-governmental organisation (NGO) community refers to as 'turfing', or the concern of one network to protect its line of work or 'turf'.

Figure 1 (overleaf) shows Mindanao civil society as a political spectrum. It is by no means exhaustive but it does include important sectors and sectoral organisations that have established a name in civil society circles. To one side are groups perceived as either 'legitimate' or 'conservative', (because of their politics or their institutional connection) and on the other are networks, service providers, people's organisations, campaign groups and the political organisations they are linked with. Public perceptions of these groups range from politically 'progressive' or liberal to 'subversive'. Civil society groups of divergent political orientations quite often form broad-based alliances based on tactical or pragmatic goals.

People's organisations, non-governmental and civic organisations exist in almost all provinces in Mindanao, but compared to Christian-led organisations, Moro civil society groups are still relatively few. Most are led by middle class urban-based professionals, although grassroots organisations of farmers, fisherfolk and urban poor also exist. Among others are religious and missionary organisations, such as the Tableegh (which proselytises among Christians who have expressed interest in Islam) and a national association of Muslim converts. Mindanao's indigenous (Lumad) peoples have forged their own organisations through the years of struggle for self-determination.

As in most parts of the Philippines, civil society groups in Mindanao come to the fore during times of crisis or significant political change. For instance, in the wake of the Asian currency crisis that started in 1997, campaign groups and trade unions staged street protests and issued press releases.

Mindanao civil society groups also work among marginalised and impoverished sectors of society on a range of social development issues. Non-governmental organisations carry out research, lobby for new policies and structural change, and provide basic health

and childcare services in places lacking government services. They also support community organising, which mobilises communities not only to participate in development programmes, but also to address their demands directly to those who have power over them — local government, big business or even military forces. For example, the Moro People's Resource Center, Inc. (MPRCI) has provided community organising support for Moro and Lumad communities for more than a decade and Gabriela-Mindanao helped organise Talikala (chain), an NGO helping prostituted women in Davao and other cities to empower themselves.

The Roman Catholic Church has organised *barangay* (village) level organisations called Basic Christian Communities. Many human rights groups started as church-based organisations. Various Muslim-Christian dialogue programmes were organised in the early 1980s, for example the Duyog Ramadhan (literally, accompanying Muslims during Ramadhan). The Protestant churches in the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) have also encouraged inter-religious dialogue. The longest running Muslim-Christian dialogue programme in Mindanao is the Silsilah dialogue movement based in Zamboanga City. It was organised by a missionary group, the PIME fathers, in 1984.

Among Mindanao's academic institutions the concept of extension services as an integral part of higher education gained ground in the 1970s. In the mid-70s, at the height of the war between the Philippine military and the MNLF, many church-run universities in Mindanao started community extension service programmes as a response to the immediate needs of people caught in the crossfire.

A branch of Notre Dame University (NDU) established the first such programme in the late 1960s. The Maryknoll Sisters at Notre Dame of Dulawan (the old name for Datu Piang town) established a poverty alleviation programme among Maguindanaons. They provided soft loans and free medical services, including maternal and child care, and urged them to adopt preventive rather than curative approaches to common illnesses. The sisters paved the way for civic consciousness to develop in the academe.

Civil society and the peace process

Many organisations have addressed the peace process in statements about the GRP-MNLF agreement. Some have played an advocacy role on issues directly related to the peace process. For example civil society leaders, such as Rey Teves of the Kusog Mindanaw alliance, have proposed federalism

Figure 1: Mindanao civil society

'Subversive'/'Progressive'

Ideological forces	Campaign Groups/Coalitions	People's Organisations/ Coalitions Networks	NGOs Networks Service providers
Political parties including armed political movements	Sectoral and issue-based campaigns eg foreign debt	eg Women's organisations Trade Unions Peasant's Associations Urban and Rural Community Organisations	Community Organising Research Advocacy Social Development Co-operatives Cultural Groups

as an alternative to the unitary structure of the Philippine state. Some civil society organisations are represented in the Consultative Assembly of the SPCPD, and a few are directly involved as intermediaries between the government and remaining rebel groups. (The independent committee monitoring the ceasefire between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is composed of representatives from NDU, the Maguindanaon Professionals and Employees Association, the Protestant Lawyers League and the Cotabato City Media Multi-Purpose Co-operative.)

Although the activities of most Mindanao civil society organisations were not aimed directly at promoting peace, they could be credited with preventing potential conflict spawned by poverty and displacement. This is where the cumulative impact of their peacebuilding efforts can be gauged. However, such activities rarely receive media coverage, so their impact is often undervalued in society at large.

The current government-initiated peace efforts have not consulted directly with marginalised sectors about their potential contributions to the peace process. Women have been largely ignored and Lumad organisations feel that they have been excluded. This was a recurring theme in a recent series of focus group discussions carried out under a UN-funded project. The Lumad groups feel that they should be considered important stakeholders in the present peace process (as they share their homeland with the Muslim Moros) and that government is neglecting their basic needs and problems, and treats them as last class citizens.

Media and academe

The media play a crucial role in the peace process and radio has the greatest influence on grassroots communities. Media set the agenda for public debate. It may not participate directly in negotiations, but its intermediary role as facilitator and vehicle for information about the process can make or break the peace. Most reporters, editors and producers, however, are looking for a sensational news story.

In Central Mindanao, the worldviews of media owners and practitioners tend towards political conservatism. Media owners generally come from the upper middle classes thus commercial interests and political conservatism dictate what news stories are aired on broadcast media and printed in newspapers.

Media practitioners' relationships with civil society (NGOs, people's organisations, and rebel groups) affected media coverage of the

'Conservative'/'Legitimate'

Church/Ummah	Media	Academe	Business
Inter-faith Dialogue Groups	**Print**	Institute of Higher Learning	Local Chambers of Commerce
Roman Catholic	- Mindanao bureaus of national dailies	Denominational	Banks
Protestant	- Local weeklies/dailies	State Universities/Colleges	Multinational/foreign
UMMAH Groups	**Broadcast**	Non-Denominational Private Universities/Colleges	Civic Clubs
	- Local TV radio relay stations		
	- Broadcast networks		

peace process. They tended to see civil society groups as unimportant and hence not newsworthy. Their perceptions of these groups are shaped by their political conservatism, so they classify most NGOs as leftist or even subversive. Thus they rarely consult NGOs for news related to their social development work.

In Central Mindanao, media coverage of the peace process has been unfair and inadequate. NGO leaders and workers interviewed for a 1997 case study on media and the peace process said that coverage of the process so far had excluded any historical background of the armed conflict. Moreover, media discussions on the peace process have virtually omitted civil society efforts at peace advocacy. The lack of media attention to the vital issues encompassed by the peace process has also contributed to popular misconceptions about the talks between the government and the MNLF, and a resurfacing of the age-old prejudices between Christians and Muslims. These have led to widespread antagonism to the 1996 Peace Agreement.

Perhaps no other sector in civil society has a greater potential for promoting peace advocacy than the academe, but only a few academic institutions in Mindanao have engaged in the promotion of peace and development. These include NDU in Cotabato City which has established a peace education centre offering graduate programmes in peace studies. Individual academics from NDU and Mindanao State University (MSU) have played key roles in forging the Peace Agreement. Since the agreement, several universities (including NDU, MSU-General Santos and Ateneo de Zamboanga) have been helping to implement the UN Multi-Donor Assistance Programme for MNLF ex-combatants and their communities. But generally, the lessons learned from studies have not trickled down to grassroots communities or even to people's organisations based in the countryside where peace and order crises are endemic.

'No to the SPCPD': re-opening the wounds of war

In the May 1998 local elections, a Roman Catholic parish priest in one of General Santos City's 26 *barangays* was actively campaigning against a candidate perceived to be supporting the SPCPD and the peace process. He urged his parishioners to vote for another candidate who was not 'pro-Muslim'. He preached that under a pro-Muslim mayor, all citizens would be subjected to the Code of Muslim Personal Law, that Christian women would be forced to wear the *hijab* (veil) and eating pork would be banned. The pro-peace process candidate lost the election, probably for a variety of reasons, but the campaign against her led by a person in authority – a parish priest – was significant.

Opposition to the Peace Agreement has not gone away. Some sections of civil society staged vociferous protests after the promulgation of EO 371. In General Santos City, broad-based coalitions of (Catholic) church workers, lay people, professionals and youth staged rallies in the city plaza to denounce President Ramos and the SPCPD. In other cities and towns of Mindanao, irate crowds threw tomatoes at speakers in government-organised public meetings about the Peace Agreement. In Cotabato City, designated seat of the SPCPD, opponents of the Agreement displayed banners and pasted posters on walls. One poster said: 'Give peace a chance – oppose the SPCPD!'

While the Peace Agreement may have silenced the guns of the MNLF, it has rubbed salt into wounds of war that had not yet completely healed. The war in the 1970s have left deep scars, especially among the majority Christian population, who believe that they have become 'victims' in the Moro people's struggle for self-determination. Old prejudices against Muslims surfaced, even among sectors in civil society which were thought to have developed tolerance and broad understanding of inter-ethnic relations. Many journalists and academics were among the most vociferous

critics of SPCPD and the Peace Agreement. In their eyes, the Peace Agreement opened the floodgates for granting favours to a 'troublesome' population – Muslims in general and the MNLF in particular.

Some Church groups expressed serious reservations about the SPCPD. In 1996, the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC) issued a position statement:

'it [the SPCPD] *fails to address the fundamental problems of poverty, landlessness, foreign domination and control, just wages and underdevelopment, among others, of the Bangsamoro people (Muslims, Lumads and Christians in Mindanao); it increases [sic] Muslim and Christian elites who will perpetuate the exploitation of the majority; it is insensitive to Lumad and Christians' struggle for peace.'*

The lack of grassroots consultation before the SPCPD was proclaimed stoked resentment among Mindanao's Christian and Lumad populations. At the height of the controversy, broadcast media in Mindanao were holding daily radio fora on the pros and cons of the final Peace Agreement, and especially on the SPCPD. Many listeners said that SPCPD was just another government development package favouring business interests, especially multinational corporations. They felt that it would not really address the basic needs of Mindanao's poor and politically powerless Lumads, Christians and Muslims.

Muslim civil society groups sympathetic with the MILF see the Agreement as a manifestation of the government's insincerity in addressing the Bangsamoro problem. They see the SPCPD as an attempt to assimilate the Bangsamoro people into larger Philippine society, whereas the only way forward for them is to secure their own independent state.

The negotiations leading to the Peace Agreement focused on the differences and common ground between the MNLF and the government. This was understandable, given the government's strategy of dealing with one rebel group at a time, but it meant that the concerns of constituencies outside the MNLF would not be addressed. Wider public consultation during the negotiations would not necessarily have led to an agreement solving all the problems of Mindanao, but it could at least have conveyed more clearly that the SPCPD was the first step, and not the last word.

The tortuous road to peace

Amid the popular opposition to SPCPD, some civil society sectors in Mindanao have decided to light a candle instead of cursing the darkness. Among the first influential group to express support was the Mindanao-Sulu Church Peace Congress, which gathered together Catholic bishops, priests, religious and lay workers in June 1996. This was a breakthrough for Mindanao's Catholic Church, which rarely speaks with one voice, especially on political issues. The participants produced a conference statement welcoming the proposed creation of the SPCPD as a 'significant step along the tortuous road to peace'. They also committed themselves to set up regional bodies to co-ordinate local support for the peace process with the MNLF.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines followed suit when leaders of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), a member of NCCP, visited President Ramos in July 1996. Afterwards, the UCCP and the NCCP issued statements: the NCCP expressed 'approval and full support', but the UCCP gave 'conditional' support to the SPCPD:

'we now offer ourselves to be partners in this long journey of peace but we should also raise questions. What kind of development? Who benefits from this development? What is the people's participation in the process of development?'

Many Lumad and Moro organisations are asking similar questions. Their particular fear is of becoming alienated from their own culture in the process of being mainstreamed into larger Philippine society.

(L to R) Protestant Bishop Hilario Gomez, Mahid Mutilan (head of the Ulama League) and Catholic Archbishop Fernando Capalla sign a covenant of peace, Marawi City 1997

Source: Bobby Timonera

The business sector also expressed support for the peace process. Right after the signing of the Peace Agreement on 2nd September 1996, the Office of the President for Mindanao reported an 'upbeat business mood felt all over Mindanao', and newspapers reported the coming of new investors in droves.

In the Socsargen (South Cotabato-Sarangani and General Santos) growth area, a predominantly business-led multi-sectoral group was organised a few months after the Peace Agreement was signed. The Socsargen Movement for Unity and Development gathered prominent businesspeople and influential civil society leaders to produce action plans supporting government peace initiatives. One of their concrete contributions was to facilitate emergency aid for the MNLF co-operative in Lumatil, Sarangani province.

Many civil society groups who support the peace process with the MNLF also raise legitimate questions about government strategies for promoting peace and development in Mindanao. Many church-based groups, for example, believe that people's organisations should not be treated as if they are simply bystanders in the peace process. As the NCCP Policy on Peace points out: *'if any peace process is to take place at all, it should be one in which the people, those whose lives are at stake, must play a role – not merely as spectators, but as a motive force.'*

This realisation has convinced some of the more progressive and liberal-minded leaders of the influential *ulama* (Muslim clerics) to enter a dialogue with the bishops of various Mindanao churches. This group, now known as the Bishops-Ulama Conference, has met several times for discussion, and to make pronouncements on the peace process. They have shown that it is possible for disparate groups to come together for peace and have set an example with strong potential for reconciliation and long-term collaboration. However, some Muslim religious groups distrust the initiative because it is largely organised by Christians.

Civil society prospects in peacebuilding

When organised into common interest groups, ordinary people can be a potent force in any social undertaking. Civil society groups in Mindanao have manifested their willingness and commitment to work for peace.

Social mobilisation, empowering people and generating small-scale livelihood projects, reduces potential conflict among marginalised and impoverished groups. Although no panacea for oppression and discrimination, livelihood programmes help to remove the immediate problem (survival) and reduce petty crime within communities. In this sense civil society organisations, especially NGOs and service providers, contribute to peacebuilding. Unfortunately, this potential has not been given due recognition in the official peace process.

While civil society sectors are eager to become active partners in government efforts to promote and sustain peace, they have legitimate concerns. Their vision of social transformation is independent of government intervention and, in becoming such partners, they fear co-option or arm-twisting to toe the official line.

Given their capabilities in accessing resources and in community organising, many Mindanao civil society groups could become effective partners of government in an official peace process. But they need to adapt to fast-changing circumstances. They need to be flexible in addressing the day-to-day changes in the political landscape that result from the various phases of a peace process. Moreover, they need to realise that there are no instant dividends after any peace accord, and certainly not after the accord between the GRP and the MNLF. In any activity promoting sustained dialogue between groups wounded in a centuries-old armed struggle, a lot of healing has to take place.

Under a new and expanded autonomous government, civil society will need to form some kind of strategic alliance to define its roles and approaches in peacebuilding. Civil society groups can then mobilise communities to assert their role in development projects according to the provisions of the 1991 Local Government Code, which provides for active NGO participation in the development planning of local government units. Influential civil society groups like the church, media and academe should be at the forefront of promoting a culture of peace.

Government should support the peacebuilding activities of grassroots organisations. If it does not have sufficient funds, it should mobilise international donor agencies. This has started in Mindanao through the UN system for a multi-donor umbrella programme in the SZOPAD. But this programme could still engage wider participation from civil society — and the current peace process could become a blueprint for future peacebuilding efforts with other rebel groups in Mindanao. ■