**Addressing violence**

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The ceasefire between the Government and the MILF has been holding for more than a year. Still, Mindanao suffers massacres, bombings, killings, abductions and forced displacement. There is peace between the armed actors, but people don't perceive it on the ground.

This phenomenon of increased violence despite a holding ceasefire is not unique to Mindanao: more people died in El Salvador in the years after the peace agreement than during the civil war; crime in South Africa is probably higher today than during the apartheid regime.

What is this information telling us? Essentially, that we should not expect a peace agreement between the Government and the MILF to be the only solution to peaceful co-existence in Mindanao. There are other less visible sources of violence that need to be addressed before, during and after the negotiation of a political settlement. Challenging all sources of violence is a necessary approach to complement the path of political negotiations. It is an approach that needs a strong commitment by all other political, social, religious and economic agents.

**It is necessary to identify and unmask the interests that sustain violence**

In any armed conflict there are persons and institutions opposed to the peace process because they benefit from the "status quo" and are therefore fearful of change. These agents can be found among *combatants* on both sides: especially in protracted armed conflicts, some people become professional warriors and can't imagine a life beyond fighting because that is their main and maybe only skill. *Political leaders* may also benefit from war: weak governance is easy to manipulate for the benefit of a few power-holders. Corruption, vote-rigging and other related activities have been well documented at all levels – from Metro Manila down to Barangays. The Ampatuan massacre was the most dramatic expression of political rivalry where, in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, more often than not Muslims confront fellow Muslims. Related to the political is an *economic dimension*, which covers everything from the weapons supplier to all kind of contractors and the complex networks of informal and illegal economies that blossom in conflict-affected areas. In Mindanao the economic dimension of violence is also linked to land ownership: land that has often been grabbed by force and titles and privileges that are defended with violence.

People who benefit from the status quo are often called *spoilers.* They can put stumbling blocks on the path to peace, sometimes openly, sometimes quietly.

**From spoilers to champions of peace**

From a conflict transformation perspective it is important to develop more nuanced terms that don't inevitably condemn people to maintain a given behaviour. Instead, it is possible to highlight people's capacity to choose between selfish and responsible attitudes: many people do have a *spoiling potential*, but these same people can also become agents of constructive change.

It can be understandable that agents of selfish violence feel threatened by a peace process. At the end of the day, a genuine peace process is about changing power-relations: from the few and privileged to a more inclusive and just framework. But peace processes from around the world also teach us that an inclusive peace scenario most often offers space even for those who initially feared loosing their privileges. The challenge therefore is to prove and convince actors with spoiling potential that they have nothing to fear from the outcome of a peace process. Actually, if they champion the peace process they have a greater chance of enjoying the benefits of a post-conflict scenario.

**It is necessary to identify and deconstruct the worldviews and the myths that sustain violence**

As long as people consider violence to be natural or unavoidable it will be difficult to bring peace. Protracted armed conflict makes it difficult for some to envision a life of peace: several generations in Mindanao have not known any other state than violence. Under such circumstances it takes a lot of courage and creativity, as well as a genuine trust in the human capacity to do good, to think beyond the daily difficulties and to challenge the idea that humanity is doomed to be violent.

Even the most fierce warrior culture can choose to shift to nonviolent behaviour. The peaceful Scandinavian nations were once home to the feared Viking tribes; indigenous warrior groups that have been challenging colonization for more than 500 years in Latin America have turned to nonviolent resistance. The Pashtuns in the North-West Frontier Province of colonial India created a nonviolent and unarmed army of some 100,000 in the 1930s, under the leadership of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, more successfully challenging British rule than through violent resistance.

The gun culture in Mindanao is being raised by some from a *descriptive* to a *prescriptive* category. Current levels of rido have little to do with traditional conflict-settlement and instead much more to do with vested interests that thrive with a cultural justification (and absence of rule of law). Carrying weapons is certainly a tradition in many places of the world, including the Philippines and Mindanao. But traditions can evolve and change. If Malaysia has successfully implemented a gun ban and increased security for all, why should that not be possible here?

Breaking stereotypes and strengthening relations between cultures and religions, challenges the discourse of those who highlight the differences and the prejudices between the peoples of Mindanao. Interfaith dialogue is not as welcome as could be assumed. Limited progress despite huge efforts in this process is a clear reminder of the challenges people face to form an identity that crosses traditional group boundaries.

**Complex problems need multiple responses**

Most forms and agents of violence we have described don't follow political or ethnic divides. They cross them and, so, become common challenges for all peace-loving peoples, beginning with the very leaders of the peace negotiations. These forms of violence can't be distinguished as independent phenomena: they overlap and are mutually reinforcing, thus forming a *complex system of violence*. In the frame of a peace process this system needs to be addressed from several ends and by different agents including, of course, the armed actors at the negotiating table. But also by all sorts of institutions, civil society initiatives, the business sector and religious leaders with long-term vision and leadership capabilities. Everyone should ask themselves: "Am I open to change? How can I best support change?"

At the same time, responses to violence have to be addressed with concerted effort. Unilateral initiatives can be perceived as following certain interests. Joint efforts across the political divide on the other hand, have a strong confidence-building capacity. At the end of the day, the goal is to prepare the ground for a Mindanao where all peoples can live together, in accordance with their way of life and aspirations. This can only happen if people trust each other.