



# ARMM ROUNDTABLE SERIES

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*The ARMM Roundtable Series brings together academics and leaders in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to a discussion and analysis of critical issues in the autonomous region. This paper builds on the output of the discussions. Views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of Notre Dame University and the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung.*

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## Investing in Peace in the ARMM

### A SUCCESS STORY

Solaiman Usman, 46, fought fierce battles in the province of Cotabato way back in the 1970s during the early years of the Moro National Liberation Front's (MNLF) conflict against the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). As a pioneer MNLF combatant, he qualified to become a member of the MNLF Old Comrades Multi-Purpose Cooperative, which was put up as one of the fruits of the Final Peace Agreement, which the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) signed, with the MNLF in September 1996. The Food and Agriculture Office (FAO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Australian Government provided rice seeds, fertilizers, farm animals, and mechanized farm elements to the members of the cooperative. To some extent freed from the bondage of land tenancy, Usman can now keep most of his produce for his family's consumption. Farming on a one-hectare land owned by his brother, Usman gets 70 percent of the produce while his brother gets the remaining 30. Half of the land, he planted with corn, half with rice.

Along with his colleagues, he was given the opportunity to attend various training programs on the use of modern farm machinery and other agriculture-related ventures. He also attended seminars on leadership training and community organizing. His group, under the leadership of Johnny Sugaguil, Vice-Chair for military affairs of the MNLF's Sebangon Kutawato State Revolutionary Committee, has been the recipient of a hand tractor, a multi-purpose drying pavement and rice production inputs from FAO and a mini-warehouse from UNDP. "We are happy now. In fact, it's the first time that we feel happy," said Sugaguil who lost two brothers in the war. Another member of the Coop, Abdawa Karim, 46, harvests 10,000 kilos of corn, grossing nearly P60,000 during the three cropping seasons. This he was able to achieve with the farm inputs from UNDP, like corn seeds and plowing equipment. In Lumatil, Maasim town in Sarangani Province, the mobile corn-sheller donated by UNDP has been very helpful even to farmers in neighboring towns and those in the hinterlands. And in the village of Siay, Siocon town in Zamboanga City, a UNDP-donated mini-rice mill is bringing Muslims, Christians, and highlanders closer.

These are but a few of the many success stories in the still-continuing effort in the Southern Philippines to transform a once conflict-ridden region into a peaceful and productive one. The effort is driven primarily by international aid, financial and development actors, in cooperation with the Philippine Government

and local non-government organizations, who have committed their resources to fulfilling the objective of the 1996 Peace Agreement. It has not been an entirely trouble-free undertaking, given the fact that this is the first time that such an effort is undertaken as part of post-conflict rehabilitation and development. The latter experience, indeed, is a relatively new field in international aid and financial affairs. More so in the Philippine context, such concerted effort is a new occurrence, and therefore open to much scrutiny and analysis, in the interest of further improvement.

In the 1996 Final Peace Agreement signed between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front, a transition period of three years was provided, during which the areas covered by the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) “shall be the focus of intensive peace and development efforts. Public and private investments shall be channeled to these areas to spur economic activities and uplift the conditions of the people therein.”<sup>1</sup> The Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD), was also created, with one of its powers and functions being “to focus on peace and development efforts more particularly in the depressed areas and cause the implementation of peace and development projects.”<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the provision on the joining of elements of the MNLF into the AFP and the Philippine National Police also says that, “There shall be a special socio-economic, cultural and educational program to cater to MNLF forces not absorbed into the AFP, PNP and the SRSF to prepare them and their families for productive endeavors, provide for educational, technical skills and livelihood training and give them priority for hiring in developmental projects.”<sup>3</sup>

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These provisions lay the foundation for what was billed as a “Mini-Marshall Plan” for Mindanao, with the hope of generating funding support for the variety of projects and programs to be undertaken from various international agencies and governments. The Philippine case is but one of the many situations in post-conflict areas in different parts of the world in which international organizations have had to intervene. Such interventions have so become complex that it has evolved into some sort of a “science” itself, guided by principles and theories drawn from experiences and “experiments” in various post-conflict scenarios. At the same time, post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction is still an evolving endeavor, with each new case offering new lessons springing from new exigencies.

## **INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE**

Immediately after the signing of the 1996 Peace Agreement, pledging sessions for the post-conflict recovery effort began to be held, involving key international institutions and governments, encouraged by the Philippine government. The chief institutions and governments which responded positively to this call were the World Bank, the United States government, Canada, Islamic nations, and the United Nations.

The World Bank put up what it called the SZOPAD Social Fund. The U.S. government responded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI). The Muslim world acted through the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). The United Nations

Development Program, for its part gathered other governments to put up a Multi-Lateral Fund.

These agencies and governments implemented a whole array of activities. The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of the USAID, sought to provide emergency livelihood assistance to the former MNLF combatants and their families. The more specific activities of their program consisted of direct livelihood assistance in the form of farm inputs and implements, training and technical support for corn and seaweed production; the establishment of a “community fund” from the payments of the livelihood assistance recipients, and which was to be managed by the community itself for projects to benefit the whole community; and a functional literacy activity.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), for its part, put its funds for its Local Government Support Program (LGSP), which set up programs for the development of the skills of local government officials, as well as social infrastructure projects.

The World Bank’s SZOPAD Social Fund set aside millions of dollars to fund high-impact projects such as school buildings, artesian wells, farm-to-market roads, madrasahs or Islamic schools, solar dryers, and health centers.

The UNDP also went into projects the effects of which were immediately to be felt by the people, such as cash for work on a community project, sacks of rice, farm implements, animals, and even small scale enterprises run like cooperatives.

The main source of funds from Muslim countries came through the Islamic Development Bank which organized investment missions and visits to the autonomous region, encouraging Arab investors to enter into partnerships with Filipino counterparts. At the same time, it pledged to fund infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, schools, water systems, and seaports.

Later on, programs that provided support to civil society groups in their efforts at promoting a culture of peace, dialogue, and tolerance were also funded. These initiatives recognize the fact that long-term gains for peace can only be the result of the breaking down of biases and prejudices, alongside poverty alleviation.

The flurry of assistance created by the Peace Agreement demanded that the agencies involved set up suitable implementation structures and mechanisms. Field offices began sprouting in once conflict areas in order to bring the assistance as close as possible to the affected MNLF communities. Needs assessments were made to ensure that the program components and activities would correspond to actual needs of the MNLF beneficiaries. “They ranked food as their first priority, followed by clothing and livelihood. Water, education, and health came next.”<sup>4</sup> Procedures were then designed to ensure effective and efficient delivery of services.

A feature of many of these programs from the various agencies was the necessity of community participation, in whatever form – cash counterpart, labor, and management skills. Likewise, in many instances, no government bureaucracy came between the funding agencies and the MNLF beneficiaries themselves, such that

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***The building of peace is, or should be, the overriding objective of such assistance, both from the perspective of the donors and of the recipient society itself. The benefits of aid assistance then depends on whether peace-building is the ultimate goal of the assistance, and on the how effectively the assistance facilitates the attainment of this goal, on how the assistance is truly, “an investment in peace.”***

the responsibility and accountability of the MNLF state commanders were emphasized. Many non-government organizations (NGOs), on the other hand, had a heyday facilitating training sessions and helping build the capabilities of the former combatants who were now farmers anew, community fund managers, and community leaders.

The implementation of these projects and programs, however, were not without problems. In fact, problems were numerous and seemed insurmountable at times. Only the persistence and determination of the actors involved prevented the whole socio-economic dimension of the Peace Agreement from totally unraveling and disintegrating, with the grim prospect of resumption of hostilities looming ahead.

## **INVESTING IN PEACE**

Eight years later, the questions remain. *To what extent do peace and development programs of aid organizations address the root causes of the persisting armed rebellion and violence in the areas of autonomy? How do these programs strengthen the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) as a primary institution for peace and development? What are the assumptions and premises of aid institutions in their interventions in the ARMM? What can the Regional Legislative Assembly (RLA) of the ARMM contribute to insure higher yield of returns on investments for peace in the ARMM? What are the legislations aid organizations consider as important and necessary to insure the successful outcomes of their ARMM programs?*

These questions became the subject of a roundtable discussion entitled, “*Investing in Peace in the ARMM*,” sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in cooperation with the Notre Dame University Center for Autonomy & Governance, and the Office of the Speaker of the ARMM Regional Legislative Assembly (RLA), in July 2004. The title in itself expresses an important truth about the goal of external assistance in post-conflict situations. In post-conflict societies, particularly in cases where the conflict is ended with a negotiated agreement rather than with the “victory” of one party, external assistance has definite economic, social, and political impacts. These impacts can help decide whether the conflict resumes or peace finally endures.

Thus, the building of peace is, or should be, the overriding objective of such assistance, both from the perspective of the donors and of the recipient society itself. The benefits of aid assistance then depends on whether peace-building is the ultimate goal of the assistance, and on the how effectively the assistance facilitates the attainment of this goal, on how the assistance is truly, “an investment in peace.”

## **AID AGENCIES VIS-À-VIS THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT**

The discussions first of all, tried to make sense of the “problem,” or the so-called root causes of the conflict in Mindanao. Here, the whole range of issues

connected with the unrest in Southern Philippines was laid bare. Participants pointed to the basic issues of self-determination by the Muslims, respect for their unique identity, representation, and participation in self-governance as crucial towards finding solutions to their problems. It is from the perspective of these issues that the call for independence has been constantly made. These issues are not simple in themselves, for they already overlap with the interests of the rest of Philippine society. Not addressing them, however, can only contribute further to the feeling of alienation and neglect felt by many Muslims in the country.

Empowering the Muslims also involves attending to their other equally legitimate basic human needs such as appropriate education, security for their lives and properties, and livelihood opportunities that will taken them out of the rut of poverty and misery, and enable them to live decent human lives. The fact that human development indicators in the ARMM are the lowest in the whole country only serves to underscore these critical aspects.

It must be said, however, that aid agencies are not to be blamed for low human development indicators. It is government's primary responsibility to see to these measures. Donor institutions respond only through Philippine government priorities, both national and local. They cannot impose their own agenda or priorities. They are taken in as partners of the government.

As mentioned earlier, donor agencies have, in the Southern Philippine context, helped tremendously in facilitating participation, convergence, access to basic services, relief assistance, nurturing capacities for peace-building, promoting trust and confidence in officials, and developing peace infrastructure at the level of the regional government, local government units, people's organizations, non-government organizations, the academe, and grassroots communities. They have supported agencies on the ground which hopefully will stay, long after the aid agencies have left.

Much of the responsibility still remains with the national government which entered into the peace deal. Its will has to be clear about its own priorities. It must not backtrack on its commitments to the region, especially in terms of appropriating the necessary funds, and engaging the Muslims themselves in respectable and genuine partnership.

Currently, government is into negotiations again with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The mistakes and weaknesses of the earlier agreement with the MNLF must not be repeated, if things have to move forward in the region. Special mention was made of the place of a disarmament plan in the whole peace-building effort. Without such, the prospects of a lasting solution to the conflict are believed lessened.

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## **STRENGTHENING THE ARMM GOVERNANCE**

With the demise of the SPCPD and the SZOPAD, what has endured has been there before and always—the ARMM government. Yet the ARMM

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government can be considered only a shell of what its potential is. There remains the need to strengthen its capabilities towards more effective governance of its people, through parliamentary activism, vigorous and inspired leadership, and transparent and accountable governance, among others.

First and foremost, the structural defects of the Organic Act which created the ARMM need to be corrected to take into account the mandates of the 1996 Peace Agreement and subsequent realities in the region.

The Regional Legislative Assembly also needs to be more proactive in exercising its opportunities, considering that jurisprudence in the area of autonomy in the country has yet to be established firmly. Its landmark legislation of the Regional Economic Zone Authority, nevertheless, deserves credit, and the support of the national government and of aid institutions, towards raising further the level of entrepreneurial sophistication in the region. This is already considered one of the good steps made towards the economic empowerment of Muslims in the region. Areas mentioned for further RLA work include the enactment of a local government code, regional tax code and other revenue-enhancing measures, administrative code, Shariah law, and legislation to improve human resources, and education, especially as regards the rightful place of the madaris in Islamic society.

The executive branch of the ARMM government, for its part, needs to exercise transparent, effective, and efficient administration, in order not to reinforce the perception of many that government is doing nothing to improve the plight of ordinary Muslims. It needs to coordinate better with the RLA in crafting and implementing the regional development agenda, that truly empowers its constituents in all their developmental needs. More importantly, they need to continue earning the trust of the people.

In all of this, donor institutions have a role to play, as in fact, many of them are already doing. In their partnership with the Philippine government, they can help point out to national officials the essential gaps as drawn from their experience of the past years. They can also help out on continued capability-building of ARMM officials and personnel, building stronger peace constituencies at the grassroots level, and putting up key infrastructure for long-term development.

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## **SOME FRAMEWORK ISSUES FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

The various donor interventions in Southern Philippines as a result of the 1996 Peace Agreement between the government and the MNLF definitely impacted on the lives of the intended beneficiaries and the wider community affected by the conflict. In many instances, the benefits from the donor programs and activities represented the beneficiaries’ first taste of actual attention and help for their needs. Without such interventions, there would have been good reasons for the former combatants to easily revert to their former ways of resolving the conflict through armed revolution. They have been marginalized in Philippine society for a long time already and could have forced the issue of secession if efforts to bring them into the mainstream of society failed miserably.

Good results notwithstanding, the various programs, particularly the emergency responses, are but bridges to the long-term resolution of the conflict. For genuine peace to be achieved in the region, government, local communities and organizations, and the international donor community need a lot more in terms of truly addressing and eradicating the roots of the strife. Sustainability and impact to the goal of peace then are crucial factors to be considered in a strategic framework for post-conflict rehabilitation and development. The latter effort being still evolving and a relatively new undertaking even in the international arena, much more in the Philippines, all measures must be taken to learn the lessons that will make ongoing and future efforts bear good effects on the objective of peace and development.

Focusing on the experience of donor agencies and multilateral institutions involved in the effort in Southern Philippines, framework issues for sustainability can be categorized into the simple areas of Pre-Engagement, Implementation, and Hand-off.

### *Pre-Engagement Issues*

In this aspect of post-conflict reconstruction, adopting a strategic framework for engaging in the effort is crucial. Donor institutions need not only to pledge huge amounts of money, but more importantly, need to have a strategy not only for specific community involvements, but for the whole country as well, and in tandem with other donors. Stewart Patrick notes that “Although the donor community has pledged enormous sums of external assistance over the past decade to foster the sustainable recovery from conflict in many countries, the international framework to design, coordinate, and deliver such aid remains woefully fragmented and under-institutionalized. International efforts to support postconflict recovery are ad hoc undertakings governed by few consistent principles, norms, rules, or established procedures.”<sup>5</sup> This is important so that efforts in one country are not negated by a lack of or misguided interventions in another country. This principle can be applied as well within a specific country where a host of donor institutions are assisting post-conflict recovery efforts. Such a program design proceeds from a common vision on how to approach the conflict according to an appropriate reading of the peculiarities of the situation.

In the setting of Southern Philippines, coordination and collective action among the involved donor agencies leaves much room for improvement. This cannot be excused even by the fact that post-conflict recovery is still a pioneering endeavor in the country and by the fact that emergency response was necessary to avoid a relapse into violence. An effective “entrance strategy” needs to include already a component for involving the national government agencies, local governments, beneficiary communities, as well as non-governmental organizations in the whole effort of identifying the causes of the conflict, the rationale for external involvement, the nature and types of responses appropriate for the situation, implementation timetable and activities, monitoring and evaluation, and the hand-off transition. National and local government counterpart participation even at this early stage is key because external assistance has its limits, and the chief responsibility to continue the task lies with the locals themselves. It also ensures that sensitivity to the culture is considered at all stages of the assistance. This assumes, however, that the national

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and local governments are themselves sensitive to the culture and plight of their constituents, though this is itself most wanting in them.

When several agencies are also involved, as in the case in Southern Philippines, collaboration at the pre-engagement phase already sets out possibilities for joint assessments, shared databases, avoidance of duplication or overlapping activities, burden sharing, and more effective distribution of resources and efforts. The latter is important because communities can compare one agency with another and may resent not getting what the other agency or agencies are giving to other communities.

### *Implementation Issues*

At the execution phase of the recovery effort, refinement of the relationships, structures, and approaches in the strategic framework contributes to crucial adjustments that may not have been foreseen in the needs assessment and planning phase. For example, the true capability and reliability of contractors are seen only in actual implementation. Some contractors fail to deliver the required materials or services and need to be weeded out to keep the implementation flowing smoothly. Another situation involves the implementation of new approaches and activities that are seen as responding to new conditions. When the government launched full-scale military operations against the MILF in the midst of recovery efforts involving the MNLF, new situations of displacements arose which also needed to be addressed in order to avoid one problem feeding on another. Another illustration of this was when the USAID-OTI decided to enter into “reconciliation” efforts to defuse tensions resulting from the military operations against the MILF. This program, aimed at promoting tolerance and understanding among different ethnic and religious groups was terminated earlier than expected because it needed more time than what was anticipated. It also added a management burden to an already stretched staff. So even while allowing for flexibility, adequate planning and forecasting are still rules, which need to be observed. One can understand, however, that time often creates undue pressure on all those involved to come up with some activity to address an immediate concern.

***“Development must not exclude other regions so as not to create imbalances, which may cause undue migration to more, developed areas.”***

The Roundtable Report of the USAID and UNDP also makes the recommendation that “Community development should not create ‘islands of success’ that are contained at the local community level.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, development must not exclude other regions so as not to create imbalances, which may cause undue migration to more, developed areas.

Leveraging national and local government counterpart contributions is also crucial at this phase. The effort should not be seen as an exclusively external donor program. This will not serve the best interests of sustainability as it promotes continued government absence where it matters most. In fact, some beneficiary communities are unable to connect external assistance and the role of the government in securing such assistance. Government itself must be there through its instrumentalities in order to make the people feel that they are not to be soon forgotten once the external assistance winds up.

Continuing training and capability-building are other issues at this phase of the recovery efforts. The experience in Southern Philippines shows that direct assistance, in terms of funds and supplies, needs to be complemented squarely with adequate and appropriate training of those receiving the assistance. Without

this, dependence on the donor agencies and their staff, and even on NGOs will be developed. The community itself, its leaders and members, need to be at the forefront of managing the assistance received. This boosts their confidence level and makes them realize that it is possible for them to make development happen. Empowered communities and representatives are probably one of the best assurances of sustainability through the long-term haul.

Monitoring and constant evaluation need to be enhanced as well, though the donor agencies involved in Southern Philippines have done this generally well. An important aspect of these processes is the constant thought given to the program's and activities' impact on the objective of attaining lasting peace. Keeping this goal in mind challenges all the actors involved to evaluate whether they are in the right track as they go along.

### *Hand-off*

Given the vision of community ownership for the development that they need, a hand-off strategy is essential to ensure sustainability. But such strategy should not take the form of a simple cut-off date at which all external assistance immediately ends. It should be viewed and implemented more as a transition period, therefore, a series of activities that will effectively pass on the management of development.

This was a problem encountered by the donor agencies assisting in Southern Philippines. Very often, the hand-offs were seen as institutional time limits and end dates that simply stopped all further assistance even if the situation demands otherwise. Moving out of transition presumes that groups have reached a certain level of capability and sustainability, and that more or less stable external circumstances are present. In the case of Southern Philippines, it cannot be accepted that the situation has stabilized. The recent division within the leadership of the MNLF itself testifies that the organization itself is in a precarious condition, and that it has not achieved that level of stability to be able to continue the projects begun. Continuing hostilities and displacement in the region also point to the reality of instability, which, in turn, impacts on the sustainability of recovery programs already initiated.

Finally, sustainability is assured to the extent that effective linkages have been established with the appropriate government agencies and non-government organizations that will ensure follow-through of the programs. This is as crucial as the other activities in the whole post-recovery program. A more flexible rather than strictly time-bound hand-off strategy needs to be considered so as not to squander the gains and the sacrifices of all actors.

## **CONCLUSION**

"We have a very, very daunting task ahead of us,"<sup>7</sup> said Parouk Hussin at the beginning of his term as governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao. He was speaking almost six years after the 1996 Peace Agreement. The task has remained daunting, but guardedly hopeful, especially in the light of current negotiations with the MILF.

One cannot deny the impact of the donor-assisted post-conflict recovery program

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that came as a result of the 1996 agreement. Many former MNLF fighters, like 50-year old Omar Alanan who has spent half of his life as a rebel, have successfully made the transition to life as a farmer quietly tending a plot of land with his family. But the task remains daunting indeed. Lasting peace and genuine development need more time and concerted effort to take root. But with growing experience leading to increasing efficiency and effectiveness of post-conflict recovery efforts, led by government and various donor agencies, and joined in by all other stakeholders, there is hope that the objective of peace and development can be attained and resort to violence less an option in resolving conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup> 1996 GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement, in Fr. Eliseo Mercado, Jr., OMI, *Southern Philippines Question: The Challenge of Peace and Development*, (Cotabato City: Notre Dame University Center for Policy Advocacy and Strategic Studies), 186.

<sup>2</sup> 1996 GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement in Mercado, 191.

<sup>3</sup> 1996 GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement in Mercado, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Marites Vitug and Glenda Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion In Mindanao* (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy & Public Affairs and Institute for Social Policy, 2000), 266.

<sup>5</sup> Stewart Patrick, “The Donor Community and the Challenge of Postconflict Recovery,” in Shepard Forman and Stewart Patrick (eds.), *Good Intentions: Pledges of Aid for Postconflict Recovery*, (Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2000), 36.

<sup>6</sup> USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives and UNDP/Emergency Response Division, “Roundtable Report: Community-Based Reintegration and Rehabilitation in Post-Conflict Settings,” (Washington, D.C.: Meridian International Center, October 30-31, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Philippine Daily Inquirer, February 11, 2002 issue, A4.

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