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Peacebuilding from the grassroots: Resolving conflicts in Mindanao

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The peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was hailed as a significant step towards ending four decades of armed conflict in Mindanao, southern Philippines. In 2018, the Philippine Congress ratified the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) which aims to carve a self-ruled region for Muslims in Mindanao. In January 2019, a majority of the people of the Muslim provinces in Mindanao voted in the plebiscite for their communities to be included in the new autonomous region called the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

However, the Mindanao peace process should not end just because a peace agreement has been signed or a new autonomous region has been ratified by the people of Mindanao. Despite the progress that has been seen in relation to this peace process, significant challenges to the goal of inclusive peace and development in Muslim Mindanao remain. The

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The Mindanao peace process is a clear case study of the importance of bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. This is a good time to explore comprehensively this bottom-up peacebuilding approach, which is being driven primarily by the vulnerable communities themselves.

In the context of conflict resolution in the southern Philippines, grassroots-based, bottom-up processes and initiatives are being generated to protect the peace process. This article examines three major contributions of local organisations and actors to the Mindanao peacebuilding process in recent years. These are: (1) countering violent extremism; (2) articulating women's voices in the peace process; and (3) resolving local conflicts and 'rido' (clan wars).

Countering violent extremism

There is a new facet in the decades-old armed conflict in Muslim Mindanao: the emergence of violent extremist ideology that has been inspired by the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East. In 2017, a large group of ISIS-inspired militants attacked and occupied for five months the City of Marawi, a Muslim-majority city in Mindanao. The militants were members of the extremist groups *Abu Sayyaf* and *Maute* that had declared allegiance to ISIS.

Experts have attributed the rise of pro-ISIS extremist groups in recent years partly to the delay in implementing the peace agreements agreed with the main Moro rebel movements – i.e. the MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) – as well as the refusal of other armed groups to participate in the peace process. Prior to the successful establishment of the BARMM under the governance of the MILF, the uncertain prospects for implementation of the peace agreements in the past created opportunities for violent extremist groups to discredit the peace process and gain popularity among marginalised sections of Filipino Muslims and also to recruit Moro youth.

Several organisations have started conducting activities to counter pro-ISIS violent extremism in Muslim Mindanao. One such organisation is the Institute for Autonomy and Government (IAG), a public-policy centre based in Mindanao which provides research, capacity-building training and technical assistance in order to advance meaningful autonomy and governance in Mindanao.

In 2017 the IAG conducted a research project to investigate the vulnerability of Muslim youth to radicalisation and recruitment by violent extremist groups in Mindanao. The IAG report offers policy recommendations to counter violent extremism. One such recommendation is for the Philippine government to adopt a comprehensive policy framework to counter extremism that can guide national and local government units in crafting long-term programmes for its prevention.

Local religious leaders also play an important role in countering violent extremism. During the Marawi crisis, there was a strong focus on their role and how they could counter the narrative of the pro-ISIS *Maute* group. Established in 1996, the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) is a key institution for advancing the peace process in Mindanao. BUC is composed of Catholic bishops, Muslim *ulama* and Protestant bishop-pastors in Mindanao who collectively envision a society where different religious communities can live together peacefully and harmoniously.

At the height of the Marawi conflict, BUC convened the Multi-Sectoral Peace Conference in Cagayan de Oro City, Mindanao in July 2017. The Conference gathered together religious leaders from Mindanao, military officials, local government officials and NGOs. Together, the BUC and its dialogue partners strongly recommended the introduction of peace education with Islamic concepts as an antidote to extremism.

Articulating women's voices

Women's NGOs also contribute to the Mindanao peace process beyond the formal peace talks. Educating the public on Bangsamoro history is one of their contributions. Moro women and peace advocates have cited the significance of educating both the Bangsamoro and Filipino people on Bangsamoro history in order to gain nationwide support for the success of the peace process.

One important movement that conducts peace education is the Women's Organisation Movement in the Bangsamoro (WOMB), a consortium of Bangsamoro women's organisations mostly engaged in peace advocacy work. WOMB regularly organises advocacy training workshops in a bid to provide peace advocates and women's organisations with appropriate strategies in

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Another contribution of women's organisations to the peace process is assisting war evacuees. Most recently, at the height of the Marawi conflict in 2017, a Marawi-based NGO composed of Muslim women called the Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation was at the forefront of providing life-saving aid to an estimated 220,000 civilians affected by the conflict in the city. Its aid workers explained that women and children affected by the conflict were more vulnerable to sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence, even in evacuation centres. Thus, women aid volunteers and workers need to be on the frontline of providing humanitarian relief, given that they understand women's needs best of all.

Resolving local conflicts and *rido*

Community-based mediation is another important process outside the formal peace talks. This is primarily driven by the prevalence of local conflicts such as *rido* in Muslim Mindanao. *Rido*, or clan wars, have further complicated the delicate security situation in Muslim Mindanao. *Rido* is the state of recurring hostilities among families and clans, involving retaliatory acts of armed conflict triggered by an affront or disgrace to the honour of a family or its members. As of 2017, most of the 235 unresolved *rido* cases were due to land ownership issues and local politics.

In this regard, resolving local *rido* cases and the associated armed violence must be considered as another peace process which complements the broader Mindanao peace process. Several NGOs are conducting community-based mediation to resolve *rido*. One such organisation is *Tumikang Sama Sama* (TSS), which means 'Together We Move Forward' in the Tausug language of Sulu Province. TSS is now a large independent organisation of well-respected community mediators who seek to address the security challenges in Sulu Province arising from *rido*. Between 2010 and 2014, TSS handled 82 *rido* cases and helped formally settle 48 such cases in conflict-ridden Sulu. TSS uses a combination of formal legal mechanisms and indigenous cultural traditions to achieve results.

The Mindanao peace process is a clear case study of the importance of bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. This is a good time to explore comprehensively this bottom-up peacebuilding approach, which is being driven primarily by the vulnerable communities themselves.

As demonstrated in this article, there are several significant issues such as clan wars and an increase in extremist ideology that are not directly addressed by the top-down peace process or by the Bangsamoro Basic Law. Grassroots actors can contribute to mitigating and resolving these issues that may otherwise threaten the sustainability of the overall peace process.

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