



ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY



Joint Learning Initiative
on Faith & Local Communities
Strengthening Evidence-Based Faith Engagement



Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order:

The 'Tangible' and 'Intangible' Aspects of Local Faith Actors' Contributions

Philippines Country Report

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Executive summary

The research project Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order explores the critical yet often overlooked role of local faith actors (LFAs) in fostering social cohesion, conflict resolution, and sustainable development in fragile contexts, with a focus on three countries: Burundi, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. This report focuses on the study conducted in the Philippines by the Ateneo de Manila University in partnership with World Vision Development Foundation, Inc. (World Vision International in the Philippines) and Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology.

Against a backdrop of global disorder – marked by rising populism, climate crises, and post-colonial inequalities – this study highlights how LFAs bridge the material or ‘tangible’ and spiritual or ‘intangible’ dimensions of peacebuilding, offering unique insights into community resilience. While mainstream peacebuilding frameworks often marginalize ‘intangible’ or spiritual contributions, this research underscores the need to integrate faith-based approaches into broader humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding strategies.

The primary objectives of the research project are twofold: first, to analyze the ‘tangible’ (material) and ‘intangible’ (spiritual) contributions of LFAs to peace and reconciliation in Burundi; and second, to advocate for greater recognition of these contributions among international actors operating within the ‘triple nexus’ of peace, development, and humanitarian aid. The study addressed the following research questions:

- What kinds of activities have LFAs engaged in with their communities to promote resilience, peacebuilding and reconciliation in response to the impacts of global disorder felt at the local level?
- In what ways do LFAs mobilize ‘spiritual’ or ‘intangible’ forces? What meaning does this have for their approach to building resilience, peace and reconciliation and what harm might emerge from their (mis)application?
- What lessons can be learned from highly localized initiatives that might be useful in other contexts and how can this contribute to developing a conceptual framework to inform engagement and partnership between LFAs and other stakeholders?

Methodologically, the project adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach, combining interdisciplinary theories from religious studies, sociology, and conflict analysis. Central activities included workshops with religious leaders/LFAs using an adapted Do No Harm for Faith Groups (DNHFG) tool, monthly ‘cellphilms’ (short videos recorded on mobile phones) produced by LFAs to document their peacebuilding practices, in-depth interviews, and case studies. In the Philippines, the research engaged 33 religious leaders/LFAs from diverse faiths, regions, and areas of specialization, but with a focus in Mindanao, the country’s southernmost island group. Throughout the study,

participants engaged in varying levels of participation which depended on various factors including availability, internet connectivity, and proximity to workshop locations. The DNHFG workshops emphasized conflict sensitivity, while a follow-up workshop aimed to refresh concepts from the previous DNHFG workshop and introduce some concepts from the Empowered World View (EWV) module. The broad distribution of participants across Mindanao and beyond provided crucially diverse perspectives on peace. Unlike in Sri Lanka and Burundi however, this setup limited the interaction of participants and the research team.

We present three key findings. First, our participants articulate peace as a lived experience—one that is personal and at the same time, interpersonal. They have articulated various facets of peace based on their own experiences: a) peace in the family/domestic sphere; b) intra-religious, interreligious and intercultural peace; c) peace as holistic (shalom and jihad); d) peace as safe space; and e) peace as personal, political, and economic security. Second, peacebuilding is motivated by our religious leaders' faith and values. Their responses which address crucial gaps in governance and social services are deeply anchored in their own religious contexts and spiritualities. Third, religious leaders are able to draw on their traditional authority to influence the shape of peacebuilding in their respective communities. This includes working closely with secular authorities. These findings are important in two respects. First, they advance the idea of peacebuilding beyond the context of addressing violent conflict and foreground communities as loci of creative forms bringing about and sustaining peace (Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015). We are currently witnessing this in the Bangsamoro region's fragile transition towards normalcy. While the threat of violent conflict inspired either by rogue armed elements or extremists still looms, more attention is being paid to addressing the structural roots of conflict such as economic and social inequality. Thorny issues that have been previously marginalized, such as gender and sexuality/sexual health, are now gradually being discussed. Second, they break harmful and stereotypical depictions of Mindanao as the nation's backwater, beset by the never-ending conflict between Muslims and Christians.

We recommend that the relationship between religious leaders and secular authorities be recognized and clarified to harness the positive potential of these engagements. Equipping religious leaders through continuous capacity building and training especially on 'hard skills' such as mediation is important in sustaining efforts on a local scale. Institutional partners should also be ready to extend technical assistance to local religious leaders in such efforts.

Religious leaders have since been at the forefront of peacebuilding in Mindanao. Our study recognizes their role and the 'intangible' sources that continue to drive their sense of purpose and mission. However, they should be prepared to address novel challenges and complex issues that may contradict their convictions as Mindanao transitions to a post-conflict setting.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the project



This report, which focuses on the research carried out in the Philippines, forms part of a wider project that seeks to deepen scholarly and public understanding of local faith actors (LFAs) and their role in fostering community resilience, peace, and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Burundi. Despite their significant contributions, LFAs have been largely marginalized in scholarship on peace and conflict and in mainstream peacebuilding efforts. When acknowledged, the focus has primarily been on their 'tangible' contributions, while the 'intangible' or spiritual dimensions of their work remain overlooked.

This reflects what scholars have termed a 'secular bias' in international peace, development, and humanitarian action (Tomalin, 2013; Wilkinson, 2020, 2022). In this framework, religious belief and practice are considered useful only insofar as they serve development goals – provided that expressive religiosity is kept at a distance to maintain the supposed neutrality of the secular international aid system. This bias discourages any integration of faith-based community work with overt religious missions or practices, such as prayer and rituals that engage with the divine or higher principles.

Our research argues that this narrow engagement with Local Faith Actors (LFAs) not only overlooks valuable opportunities for collaboration and transformation but also constitutes a form of epistemological and ontological injustice (Jones & Peterson, 2009; Wilson, 2017). It forces faith actors to adapt their community engagement and outreach to align with the standards of the secular international aid system.

Furthermore, the tendency to separate the ‘tangible’ from the ‘intangible’ aspects of faith-based peacebuilding in research and analysis risks misrepresenting how faith engagement operates in practice. ‘Tangible’ or material assets—such as buildings, governance structures, networks of trust, and local knowledge – are inseparable from ‘intangible’ or spiritual assets, including religious identities, beliefs, prayer, worship, and rituals. These spiritual dimensions mediate between the material world and the transcendental or supernatural, shaping how faith communities contribute to peace, humanitarianism, and development.

Our project takes place against the backdrop of growing global disorder, intensified by rising populism, climate crisis, the threat of future pandemics, and the enduring legacies of colonialism and economic failure. These forces have contributed to widespread social inequality and violent conflict both within and between nations. The theme of Global (Dis) Order captures the fragility, uncertainty, and pervasive fear of violence experienced worldwide.

Friedman (1993: 205) characterizes this disorder as ‘of a global nature, but [where] experience of that disorder is highly personal for most people [marked by] increasing violence and imagination of violence, increasing fear of catastrophe, or dangerous illness... of unemployment and bankruptcy and loss of property.’ Written nearly three decades ago, these words are perhaps even more relevant today.

Addressing this disorder requires radical, lasting solutions that engage a diverse range of actors and strategies. This includes voices often overlooked or dismissed by international policy frameworks, as well as bold new conceptual approaches that embrace diverse values, languages, traditions, and self-understandings. Our project responds to this challenge through participatory action research with local faith actors (LFAs) in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Burundi. To address this, through ‘participatory action research’ with LFAs in Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Burundi our project had two overarching aims:



To better understand the ‘tangible’ (or ‘material’) and ‘intangible’ (or ‘spiritual’) aspects of the contribution of LFAs to building resilience, peace and reconciliation as a response to Global (Dis) Order at the local level.



To promote broader recognition amongst the ‘triple nexus’ (1) of international peace/development /humanitarian actors of the ‘intangible’ or ‘spiritual’ aspects of the contribution of LFAs to building resilience, peace and reconciliation through co-producing (with LFAs) a conceptual framework that can inform engagement and partnership between LFAs and other stakeholders.

The project overall has addressed the following research questions:



What kinds of activities have LFAs engaged in with their communities to promote resilience, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in response to the impacts of global disorder felt at the local level?



In what ways do LFAs mobilize 'spiritual' or 'intangible' forces? What meaning does this have for their approach to building resilience, peace, and reconciliation, and what harm might emerge from their (mis)application?



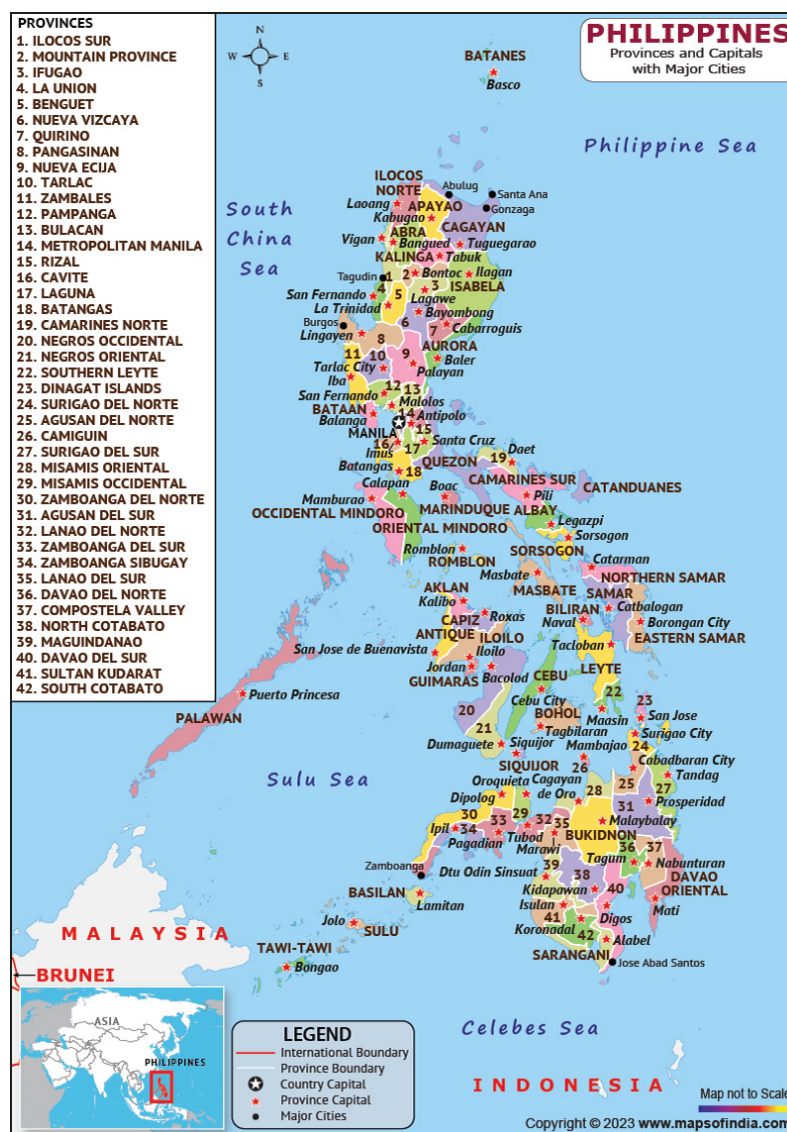
What lessons can be learned from highly localized initiatives that might be useful in other contexts, and how can this contribute to developing a conceptual framework to inform engagement and partnership between LFAs and other stakeholders?

In the Philippines, the academic component of this research was led by Dr. Jayeel Cornelio, sociologist of religion and Professor at the Department of Development Studies, Ateneo de Manila University. Mr. Oliver Apud, Peacebuilding and Context Adaptation Officer of World Vision Development Foundation, Inc. (World Vision International in the Philippines), served as practitioner lead. Research assistance throughout the study was provided by Mr. Robbin Dagle of the Department of Development Studies, Ateneo de Manila University. For our case study, we received assistance from our research intern, Ms. Irene Cañete of the Department of Sociology, Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology. We also acknowledge the invaluable support and input of Mr. Septrin Calamba, assistant professor at the Department of Sociology, Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology and notetaking assistance by Mr. Franklin Duane Madriñan of the Department of Development Studies, Ateneo de Manila University.

This report is divided into three parts, namely introduction; findings/outcomes; overall reflections, and lessons learnt.

1.2 Country context

The Philippines is a country of about 112 million people and more than 7000 islands (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2025). Most Filipinos (78.8%) are Roman Catholic, an enduring legacy of three centuries of Spanish colonization (1565 – 1898) (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Some 6% belong to other Christian denominations, many of which were established after the arrival of Protestant missionaries during the American occupation (1898 – 1946) (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). The second biggest major religion in the Philippines is Islam, whose adherents comprise more than 6% of the population (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Islam was first introduced in the Sulu archipelago as early as the 14th century, long before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors.



Our study focused on the southern island group of Mindanao, a diverse region where the majority of the country's Muslim population is based. Scholars have often described the Mindanao conflict as protracted – tracing back to the Spanish colonial era – and rooted in deeply-harbored mistrust among peoples of various faiths, ethnicities, and groups (Rüland et al. 2019). The cause of this conflict is commonly attributed to and simplified as religious tensions between the Philippines' Christian majority and Muslim minority peoples. Yet many scholars are careful not to characterize the Mindanao conflict as a purely religious conflict, but rather one with 'religious dimensions,' (Muwahidah 2012) as the influence of local elites, as well as the state's vicious cycle of neglect and brutal control (Rood 2005; Abinales 2016) have arguably equally shaped the region's troubled history.

The Spanish and American colonial powers brought with them anti-Muslim prejudices. For instance, Spanish Catholic clergy introduced the 'moro-moro,' a play depicting the victory of Christians against Muslim bandits (Rüland et al. 2019). The Americans subjected Mindanao to military rule for 13 years, from 1900 until 1913, at which time, most of the country was already under civilian government (Abinales 2020). During this time, the American military perpetrated brutal atrocities against the Moro (local term for the Muslim peoples based in the Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan islands) population, including the massacre of Muslims in Bud Dajo in 1906, and Bud Bagsak in 1913. Soon after, a wide-scale resettlement program encouraged the mostly-Christian peoples of Luzon and Visayas to move and populate Mindanao. A century ago, Muslims comprised 80% of Mindanao's population (Rüland, et al. 2019). This is now down to 18%, and Muslims are the majority in just five out of fourteen of the island group's provinces (Rüland et al. 2019).

The present-day conflict between Muslim separatist groups and the Philippine state can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s, during the rule of dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. In 1968, Muslim recruits training on Corregidor Island off the coast of Manila were killed by their military superiors after they discovered the true purpose of their mission to invade the Malaysian territory of Sabah (Bangsamoro Information Office 2021). The incident, revealed by Marcos' rival Senator Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino Jr., sparked anger among Moro youth. In 1972, Nur Misuari, formally established the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which sought to establish an independent Islamic state. Infighting regarding the movement's goals set off divisions and led to the establishment of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1984.

The MNLF would reach a peace deal with the government only in 1996, and Misuari was soon elected as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The MILF, however, capitalized on the MNLF's unpopularity and would continue fighting the government into the 2000s. Peace talks with the MILF gained traction during the administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, but were derailed after the Supreme Court declared an unconstitutional agreement on ancestral lands, ushering in a fresh round of violence. The succeeding administration of Benigno Aquino III managed to sign a peace deal with the MILF which included the creation of the Bangsamoro, a new autonomous region that would replace the ARMM and would expand the regional government's powers through legislation passed by Congress. Another violent encounter occurred in 2015 involving MILF forces and the military, who were then looking for suspected terrorists. This incident spoiled the passage of the proposed Bangsamoro law. It took another three years, under the succeeding president Rodrigo Duterte, the first from Mindanao, for the law to be passed

and for a plebiscite to ratify it (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, 2018; Bangsamoro Information Office, 2019).

Ochiai (2016) points out that the 'heart of the Mindanao conflict...is the Muslim community's 'resolve to reestablish...self-determination in [their] long-lost home' (39). He names three underlying causes to the conflict: first is the 400-year 'political, economic, social and cultural oppression' of the Muslims; second is the government's exploitation of ancestral lands (an issue which also hounds the Lumad, the indigenous tribes of Mindanao); all of which contribute to the third cause, which is pervasive poverty in Muslim areas (Ochiai 2016).

The political scientist Patricio Abinales complicates the 'orthodox' accounts perpetuated by state and development agencies. Abinales (2016) argues that the conventional account of Mindanao 'assumes a history of unceasing conflict' and privileges 'minority-majority tensions, religion as an inspirational force for armed change and the omnipresence of a capable state and its coercive apparatuses in the Philippine south' (39). Moreover, Abinales argues the conventional account of the Mindanao conflict understates the role of Muslim local elites (40). Furthermore, Abinales argues that historically, conflict has been 'the exception rather than the rule,' and was caused 'by factors other than religion' (Abinales 2016, 39).

Civil society peacebuilding initiatives

Civil society and grassroots organizations have had a robust presence in Mindanao, undertaking various peacebuilding efforts across sectors and specific localities (Trajano 2020). Rood (2005) thus describes the peace movement in Mindanao as 'active,' reflecting 'the general strength of civil society in the Philippines as a whole as well as special efforts made to manage Mindanao conflicts over the years' (p. vii). Civil society is also crucial in local or 'horizontal' peace efforts due to the delays and detours of the 'vertical' formal peace process between the government and rebel groups (Rood 2005, 24; Rüland et al. 2019, 99). Even if vertical conflicts have abated (Gulane 2023), civil society would still prove to be crucial in building and sustaining peace, as private

armies and extremist and fundamentalist elements such as Daesh (ISIS) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters exploited persistent poverty and clan wars to stoke violence, particularly in instances such as the Marawi siege of 2017 and the MSU Marawi bombing of 2023.

Given the religious dimensions of the conflict, faith-based actors have been at the forefront of civil society's peacebuilding initiatives in Mindanao. Among the key peacebuilding activities that they are involved in are: 1) interfaith dialogue; 2) peace education and combating violent extremism; and 3) safeguarding community peace through preventing clan wars (rido) and ceasefire monitoring.

Interfaith dialogue

A prominent organization encouraging interfaith dialogue is the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), established in 1996 (as the Bishops-Ulama Forum) after the signing of the peace agreement between the government and MNLF.

The group consists of Catholic and Protestant bishops, and Muslim Ulama. Because of the BUC's influential membership, the group was able to effectively promote the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and spark similar efforts among local clergy and communities (Rasul 2009). Considered as a 'pioneer' (Rasul 2016) and 'one of the most vital and crucial tools of interreligious dialogue in the Philippines and an eminent conduit towards peace' (Rüland et al. 2019, 47), the BUC was initially buoyed by financial and organizational support from the Philippine government and the Catholic hierarchy. After all, the beginnings of the BUC can be traced back to a request made by former Philippine president Fidel Ramos to then-archbishop of Davao Fernando Capalla and then-governor of Lanao del Sur Mahid Mutilan to 'form an interreligious organization with a special focus on the 'moral and spiritual aspect of dialogue in Mindanao' (Evers 1998, 533; Larousse 2001, 480; D'Ambra 2016, 2011, 76, quoted in Rüland et al. 2019, 48).

Among the BUC's initiatives was organizing seminars for Catholic schools and Muslim madrasas to integrate interreligious dialogue in their curriculum (Larousse 2001: 488, quoted in Rüland et al. 2019, 47). At the height of the Marawi siege in 2017, the BUC gathered religious leaders, local government officials, the military and civil society actors for a peace conference in Cagayan de Oro. Among the recommendations endorsed after the meeting was the inclusion of Islamic concepts in peace education, and

a strengthening of the role of the madrasa system to prevent Muslim youth from engaging in violent extremism (Trajano 2020).

However, the BUC had become inactive in recent years, and was reportedly sidelined during negotiations for the Bangsamoro peace deal during the administration of the late former president Benigno Aquino III (Rasul 2016, Rüland et al. 2019). A lack of support had essentially rendered the BUC as a 'largely dysfunctional and moribund' organization (Rüland et al. 2019, 49).

The BUC has also been criticized for their '[in] ability to enter into impartial dialogue with the Muslim community,' (Rood 2005, p. 22) given the support it receives from the government and the Catholic Church, as well as its limited reach among Muslims and even among Catholics. Some have also noticed that most meetings focused on 'theological differences' and neglected controversial issues such as 'the history of the relationship between Christians and Muslims..., land rights, and resource extraction' (Neumann 2009, 70, quoted in Rüland et al., 49).

Various interfaith dialogue groups are also based in different localities. In Zamboanga City, described as the 'center of interfaith dialogue in the Philippines' (Kato 2008, quoted in Muwahidah 2012), such platforms were established as early as the 1980s. Organizations such as the Silsilah Dialogue Movement, and Peace Advocate Zamboanga (PAZ) were started by Catholic clergy, while Social and Literacy Agenda for Muslims (SALAM) Foundation was organized by Muslim leaders in 1994. These organizations have collaborated with each other and have employed similar methods, such as 'facilitating interactions between people from different religious backgrounds,' or

in 'initiating collaboration among religious leaders' in projects or releasing statements (Muwahidah 2012, 41). Moreover, the annual Mindanao Week of Peace also traces its roots to Zamboanga City (Muwahidah 2012).

Persistent negative attitudes and stereotypes are among the reasons why some people in Mindanao hesitate to engage in interfaith dialogue. Muwahidah (2012) cites mistrust of the facilitator and institutions – some of whom are led by Catholic priests – and their possible ulterior motives (including proselytization), reluctance of Christian clergy due to their distrust of Muslims, the lack of confidence to talk about their own religion, and the belief that such dialogues are futile to achieve anything. Notably, Christians seem to have a stronger negative bias against Muslims than the latter towards the former (Rood 2005, 23; Lingga 2005, 3, quoted in Muwahidah 2012, 42; Rüland et al., 2019).

Rood (2005) also points out an 'inevitable degree of asymmetry in interreligious dialogue' (22) due to Islam's looser structure compared to the Catholic hierarchy, many Christians' ignorance of Muslim people and culture, and the greater level of mistrust Christians have towards Muslims (Rüland et al., 2019).

It should be noted that while much of the literature highlights Catholic initiatives and

participation in Mindanao's interfaith dialogue, there is a notable gap in exploring other Christian denominations' participation, as well as other religions' engagements in this space.

The tendency to avoid controversial and sensitive issues were also observed in similar interfaith dialogue initiatives elsewhere in Mindanao. To maintain a 'harmonious atmosphere,' some interfaith workers chose to discuss 'peaceful issues' instead, as they find it 'impossible' to have a 'rational discussion about ongoing political issues' (Muwahidah 2012, 46). Avoidance of such issues could have serious consequences. According to the 2010 report of the Konsult Mindanao research group composed of BUC members, academics, and NGO members (Durante 2017), potential adverse consequences were evident in the confusion and misinformation surrounding people's opposition to the aborted Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD) between the government and the MILF in 2008. Muwahidah (2011) puts the implications succinctly: 'Not knowing about current developments or possible controversial peace arrangements might well contribute to the fragility of interfaith relationships. Though people could avoid political issues in the dialogue session, they cannot escape it in daily life, because the issues are realities that will affect their community' (2011, 47).

Peace education

Peace education is another key area in which faith-based actors in Mindanao are involved. This not only covers formal educational institutions, but grassroots communities as well, and follows internationally-accepted models (Manaysay and Espesor 2021, 110). International faith-based organizations such as Catholic Relief Services have also

developed learning guides with Mindanao-based teachers based on the culture of peace framework (Catholic Relief Services, 2019).

Catholic universities in Mindanao, such as Notre Dame University in the city of Cotabato and the Ateneo de Zamboanga, have established their respective centers that

conduct research and organize programs on peace education, interfaith dialogue, and conflict prevention and management (Durante 2017).

As briefly mentioned above, the BUC had advocated for peace education as a way to increase and deepen people's participation in the peace process. Following the violence that erupted after the Philippine Supreme Court's 2008 decision declaring the MoA-AD between the government and the MILF as unconstitutional, the Konsult Mindanao research group was tasked to 'surface issues and concerns, values and attitudes of people in Mindanao' (Durante 2017, 32) with peace education as 'backbone of the research framework'. The findings of this study led to the institutionalization of peace education in the basic education level, as well as in teacher training (Durante 2017).

The Philippine government has also made efforts to institutionalize Islamic education as a 'form of affirmative action contributing to the national peace and development agenda' (Al-Raschid-Arsad 2022, 3). The Department of Education (DepEd), which oversees basic education, has the Muslim Education Program, which includes the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) component. DepEd had identified the presence of Muslim learners in all regions, most of whom were in the Bangsamoro region (Al-Raschid-Arsad 2022). For its part, the Commission on Higher Education has authorized the development of Islamic Studies at the tertiary level.

Safeguarding community peace

Religious leaders also command respect in communities, making them important actors in resolving local conflicts such as rido (clan wars). Local mediator and peacekeeping organizations such as the Tumikang Sama Sama (Together We Move Forward in Tausug) in Sulu province and the Maguindanao provincial government's Task Force on Reconciliation and Unification have acknowledged the need for active participation of community leaders, including religious and traditional leaders (Trajano 2020).

An area that religious leaders were active in was ceasefire monitoring, especially at the height of fighting between the government and the MILF. One network they were

involved in is Bantay Ceasefire (Ceasefire Watch in Filipino), established in 2003 and composed of NGOs, civil society, and Muslim and Christian communities (Colleta 2006, quoted in Trajano 2020). Volunteers, mostly residents, reported violations of prevailing ceasefire agreements and spot simmering conflicts between the military and the rebels. They then requested partners, including religious leaders and elders, to come to the area and defuse the situation (Duncan 2017, quoted in Trajano 2020, 365).

1.3 Research design and implementation

1.3.1 Shared methodology and research design across the three settings

The research adopted an interdisciplinary approach combining theories and methods developed in the humanities and social sciences, especially religious studies, sociology, development/humanitarian studies, and peace/conflict studies, to inform a participatory action-oriented research design. It is participatory as it involved non-academic partners in designing and carrying out the research, and shaping and disseminating the outputs. Through engaging in 'action research', the project brought 'together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people' (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 1). The research design comprised several complementary and interlocking research activities that combined data collection with activities aimed at relationship building and social transformation through knowledge exchange and joint learning.

Activity One:

Workshops with local faith actors/religious leaders (RLs)



In each country, we held a three-day-long workshop with LFAs/RLs that followed an adaptation of the Do No Harm for Faith Groups (DNHFG) workshop tool developed by World Vision International (WVI) (McCants Turner and Garred 2022; Silalahi et al. 2016). WVI's DNHFG workshop tool is based on the 'do no harm' conflict sensitivity training tool developed by the CDA Collaborative in their Local Capacities for Peace Project for use with peacebuilding, humanitarian and development organizations in fragile settings. WVI has reworked this tool for use with LFAs/RLs in ways that also account for their faith identity and promote interfaith dialogue. It not only aims to grow their understanding of the principle of 'do no harm' and how, in understanding this, they can better contribute towards building resilience, peace and reconciliation, but also to reflect on the role of theologies/religious teachings. For our project, the DNHFG workshop tool was further re-worked at a workshop facilitated by World Vision Lanka in Sri Lanka in August 2023 attended by the core team and other local partners. The tool was developed to extend the focus on the role of theologies/religious teachings and to include consideration of the 'intangible' aspects of faith-based activities to build resilience, peace and reconciliation, as well as how this can be communicated to a broader peace/humanitarian/development audience.

Our reasons for using this tool were twofold. First, we viewed it as a data-gathering opportunity where we could address our first two research questions. Second, it was also important for the project to include a dimension that would involve LFAs/RLs in the research and provide something meaningful for them to move beyond a purely extractive research model. The selection of the LFA participants (i.e., faith leaders, employees/volunteers from faith-based organizations, and members of local faith communities) was carefully approached as this is a sensitive topic. World Vision International and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers have local collaborators in each of the project settings and played a key role in identifying and inviting LFAs who have a track record in community-based resilience, peacebuilding, and reconciliation work, as well as those who do not. Experienced facilitators delivered each workshop from within our non-academic partners with support from the local academic team members, and note-takers were present to carry out ethnographic observation.

The workshops played several roles in achieving the project aims. While they were a vehicle to gather data to address the research questions, they also reflect our focus on participatory action research. They allowed academics and LFAs to develop a trusted working relationship that continued throughout the project. They were also a learning and knowledge-sharing opportunity for the LFA participants. After the workshop, they were encouraged to document their reflections and experiences by making short monthly recordings on their mobile phones, or 'cellfilms' (Mitchell et al 2016).

Activity Two:

Production of 'cellphilms' by local faith actors

The use of 'cellphilms' by marginalized communities as a collaborative and participatory research tool, to shift the balance of power within the research process and to give more ownership to local groups is well established (McEntee et al., 2022). For nine months following the workshops, the LFAs who participated used their phones to create short (up to five minutes monthly) videos within their communities responding to nine questions.

The videos from one country were then subtitled in the languages of the other two countries and shared with the total participating LFAs across the three locations. Although some training was provided, the videos varied in quality, and not all LFAs had the time or the resources to record every month. Nonetheless, we finished the project with 167 videos overall. At the end of the project, World Vision Philippines edited a selection of the videos into a 10-minute film to share the project's work with a broader audience.



Activity Three:

Interviews with local faith actors

Qualitative research was carried out by the local academic teams who visited the LFAs in their communities to carry out two interviews - one at the start of the project and one at the end of the project. A uniform set of research questions were used across the three countries to enable comparison, but with some variations to reflect the local context. The interviews deepened our understanding of the 'tangible' and 'intangible' contribution of LFAs to resilience, peace and reconciliation beyond what was observed during the workshops.

Activity Four:

Case studies

Each country team selected one or more LFAs to return to and examine their work in more detail, observing activities and interviewing other community members.

Activity Five:

Stakeholder workshops

In each country at the end of the project, a one-day workshop was held with external stakeholders to share the findings of the research with them.

Data analysis

Ethnographic notes from the workshops and interview transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti (web-based coding software) and were coded by each of the country teams. This analysis was combined with observations from the monthly videos and case study notes and were written up in country reports.

Research ethics

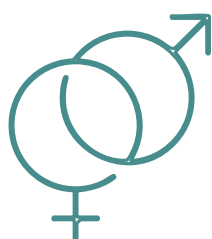
Research ethics permission for this research was obtained from the University of Leeds research ethics committee [reference: FAHC 22-138]. Ethics clearance for the local research team was also granted by the Ateneo de Manila University research ethics office, effective 31 January 2024 to 30 January 2025 (protocol number AdMUREC_23_082).

1.3.2 How the research activities were carried out in the Philippines

Research design and implementation

This study is part of a broader action research project on the role of local faith actors in peacebuilding. The study involved the following countries: Burundi, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Participants were local faith actors recruited from organizations that are part of the Hidden Peacebuilders' Network, or other groups referred by these member organizations.

The Philippine research team decided to broaden its definition of local faith actors to include religious leaders who have worked in Mindanao in various capacities and contexts. This was a practical decision initially made to mitigate the potential effects of participant attrition by recruiting more than 20 participants. We relied on our networks to refer possible participants for recruitment. As the study progressed, we saw the value in this approach, as we captured a wider range of participants in terms of location, which allowed us to take a broader look at the Mindanao context. As such, their backgrounds include: Evangelical pastors from South Cotabato and Zamboanga, mainline Protestant women pastors from CDO, Islamic and traditional scholars and youth peacebuilders from Marawi, public school teachers from Cotabato, IDP advocates based in Manila. We recruited a total of 33 participants who joined at least one of the workshops conducted. Our participants' key demographics are the following:



Gender

- Female: 12
- Male: 20
- Queer: 1



Religion:

- Muslims: 18
- Christians: 14
 - Catholic: 5
 - Evangelical/Pentecostal: 7
 - Mainline Protestant: 2
- Unknown: 1



Occupation

- Ustads (Islamic scholars): 5
- Internally displaced persons (IDP) advocates: 5
- Peacebuilding advocates: 4
- Teachers: 7
- Pastors: 8
- University/college teacher: 2
- Sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) advocate: 2



Location

- Marawi City (Mindanao): 12
- Cagayan de Oro City (Mindanao): 4
- Cotabato City (Mindanao): 2
- Zamboanga City (Mindanao): 3
- Sultan Kudarat (Mindanao): 3
- Iligan City (Mindanao): 3
- Bukidnon (Mindanao): 1
- Greater Manila Area (Luzon): 3
- Cebu (Visayas): 1

The Philippine team conducted the following major research activities from 2023 to 2025:

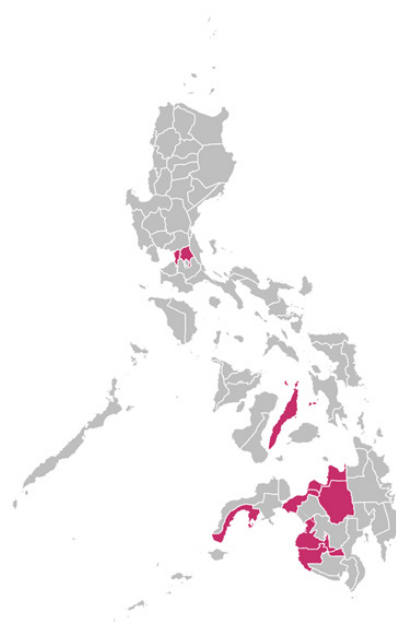


Workshops

- Do No Harm Workshop (New Dawn Hotel, Cagayan de Oro City; 19-20 October 2023) - 28 participants
- Do No Harm Refresher and Empowered Worldview Workshop (N Hotel, Cagayan de Oro City; 17-18 August 2024) - 20 participants
- Stakeholders' Workshop (Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology, Iligan City; 14 June 2025)

The first two workshops were abbreviated from the usual three days to two days to accommodate our participants' work schedules. Managing time for these workshops was somewhat challenging, as participants were very active and passionate during the discussions. For instance, an introductory discussion on faith, religion, and spirituality for the first 'Do No Harm' workshop took half a day, when it was meant to last only about an hour. This was a pleasant surprise for the team, as it reflected the deep and, at times, differing meanings attributed to the terms based on their respective religious traditions.

Locations colored in pink denote the provinces where our participants are based.





Field site visits

- Iligan City - 1-6 December 2023
- Cagayan de Oro City, Iligan City, Marawi City - 29 January to 3 February 2024
- Isulan, Sultan Kudarat - 10-13 July 2024
- Cagayan de Oro City, Iligan City, Bukidnon - 14-18 August 2024
- Iligan City - 17-23 October 2024

The site visits were chosen depending on whether there is a research activity nearby, or if the LFAs have an activity where the researchers were invited and allowed to observe.

Monthly videos

The monthly videos were recorded by our participants remotely and sent via Messenger. The research assistant would send the prompts in the group chat and would remind the participants personally through private messages from time to time. Filming the videos was quite challenging given the participants' busy schedules and the unreliable internet connection, especially in remote areas such as parts of Marawi. Since participants were scattered throughout the Philippines, it was difficult for the research team to physically follow up or to facilitate the filming in person. The research team utilized field visits, interviews, and in-person workshops to gather data and catch up on missed months. Despite these challenges, the Philippines team managed to record 42 videos.



2. Findings/outcomes

2.1 Offshoots from the research that emerged during the timeline of the project

Mindanao Week of Peace 2023

The Mindanao Week of Peace (MWP) is an annual event co-organized by the Philippine government since 2001, the former Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), and other civil society groups, that sought to 'recognize the common aspirations of Mindanaoans to live in peace, unity and harmony with each other regardless of status in life, religion or culture.' This is usually observed around late November to early December. The BUC, however, which is among the key organizers of the MWP had become inactive, as discussed above. To kick start preparations for MWP 2023, Oliver Apud of World Vision Philippines and Myrna Siose, a participant and veteran peacebuilder affiliated with the Archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro, took it upon themselves to initiate a brainstorming session with participants of the first Do No Harm workshop in October 2023, one evening after the formal business of the workshop was completed for the day. Apud, Siose, and volunteer participants met to share their ideas for the MWP theme after the workshop sessions.

The discussions were pivotal in developing the eventual theme for MWP 2023, which was 'Peace is Coming Home through Harmony and Solidarity.' The theme was inspired by the experiences of internally-displaced persons (IDPs) of the 2017 Marawi Siege who have yet to return to their homes, years after the fighting ended. In at least one instance, the bonds created among the participants also facilitated the sharing of resources for MWP events. Myrna Siose asked Reverend Bernadette Curan of the Pilgrim Christian College for help in reserving their auditorium for a concert for peacebuilders.



Local Do No Harm workshop in Sultan Kudarat (July 2024)



Inspired by the desire of our participants from Sultan Kudarat province to organize an event in their town, World Vision Philippines conducted a local Do No Harm workshop in Isulan town from 11 to 12 July 2024. The participants were members of interfaith groups from Bagumbayan and Esperanza towns, all of them pastors coming from various Christian churches. The participants included Pastor Elmer Sulmaca, Pastor Rodelyn Marbebe, and Pastor Jobert Supangan, who were present at the first Do No Harm workshop in Cagayan de Oro last August 2023, and who requested a similar workshop. Interestingly, officers of the local water service cooperative were also present, as some religious leaders were also involved in these groups. Thus, to accommodate everyone's needs, the seminar was packaged to include three topics: Do No Harm (local capacities for peace framework), leadership, and faith.

Marawi Forum with the Ateneo de Manila's Development Studies Society students (October 2024)



The Development Studies Society (DevSoc), the student organization of Development Studies students of the Ateneo de Manila University conducted a forum titled 'Pagpukaw: Stories of Struggle from Marawi City' on 18 October 2024. The event aimed to give 'space to share information on the current situation of Marawi IDPs and how the ongoing rehabilitation process infringes on their human rights, expand support for the campaign advocating for Marawi IDPs, and identify opportunities for collaboration.' Among the resource persons invited were Emmanuel Modi and Ramadan Muntor, IDP advocates from the Justice for Marawi, Justice for All group. Planning and support for the resource persons' stay in Manila were facilitated by the network formed by the project.

2.1 Findings and discussion

Casting our net wide, the project recruited participants from four of six administrative regions in Mindanao, as well as those who previously worked in the area but are now based in different parts of the Philippines. This resulted in a diverse set of participants with unique experiences in peacebuilding. When taken together, however, their stories reveal and emphasize the interconnectedness of the personal, social, economic, political and spiritual in peacebuilding. Their efforts reveal varying responses to the many local issues that reflect various facets of global disorder. A peacebuilder and academic from Iligan, describes peace as 'multifaceted, it's multidimensional, it's really a journey, and it's personal. So there is no definitive definition, there's no definitive answer to what peace is for me, but it's a lived experience.'

Our findings echo this point that peace is a lived experience. It is personal at the same time that it is interpersonal. For some of our religious leaders, this is about personal peace, pertaining to one's inner disposition and character. An ustadz who leads Cotabato City's Islamic Studies and Arabic Languages program in public schools, says that his understanding of peace is guided by the Prophet Muhammad's words that the 'character of a Muslim is peaceful, his people are secured from his words and from his hands. So, his people will not be hurt by his words, and moreover, his people will not be hurt by his hands.' Thus, he believes that internal peace is intimately connected with external peace.

Because I believe that if all people or the majority of the people have internal peace, I think that there will be no chaos, no violence, no human-induced calamity because everyone has a peaceful environment. But if the majority is not like that, if there is a small problem, they will go home to the chaos because they don't have much patience and understanding for their fellowmen.

A Christian pastor from Sultan Kudarat echoes this point about peace being an internal disposition first and foremost. It is a state of the mind. According to him, peace can be anchored on Romans 12:1-2, which says 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.' He shared that there is no peace if the mind is not transformed. Peace for him is a result of the transformation of the mind that will eventually translate to the peace of the heart.

What is clear from our religious leaders is that peace as an interior disposition affects one's social acts. This is why part of peace as lived experience is in relation to their immediate spheres of influence. Whether in the context of the family or economic security, peace for our participants must be experienced. In settings where peace is a challenge, they work for it in the form of advocacy, ministry, or interreligious dialogue. This goes to show how our participants do in fact respond to local expressions of what we have referred to above as

'global disorder' in their communities. This is to be expected. As we have recounted above too, peacebuilding in Mindanao has addressed crucial gaps in governance and social services in the grassroots especially in times of violent conflict. These responses are anchored in their own religious contexts and spiritualities, but are also conscious of their communities' diversity in terms of faith, culture, and traditions. Adopting the language of Do No Harm, many of our participants have described the work of peacebuilding as being 'connectors.'

Our findings are important in two respects. First, they advance the idea of peacebuilding beyond the context of addressing violent conflict and foregrounds communities as loci of creative forms bringing about and sustaining peace (Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015). We are currently witnessing this in the Bangsamoro region's fragile transition towards normalcy. While the threat of violent conflict inspired either by rogue armed elements or extremists still looms, more attention is being paid to addressing the structural roots of conflict such as economic and social inequality. Thorny issues that have been previously marginalized, such as gender and sexuality/sexual health, are now gradually being discussed. Second, they break harmful and stereotypical depictions of Mindanao as the nation's backwater, beset by the never-ending conflict between Muslims and Christians. While Mindanao has indeed suffered from centuries of conquest and exploitation from the central government (both colonial and Filipino), these simplistic characterizations continue to fuel resentment between Mindanaoans and outsiders—especially those from the so-called 'Imperial Manila.' Such narratives have proven to be potent in the prevailing national political climate, dominated by the feud between the Dutertes of Mindanao (who are also Bisaya-speaking, and thus command a following in the Cebuano-speaking areas of the Visayas) and the Marcoses of the Ilocos region in the northern island of Luzon.

Peace in the family, domestic sphere

For a Christian pastor from Zamboanga, the family and home are the focal points of peacebuilding. 'Please help me to pray for more opportunities to establish the word of God in homes. Because that's the only peacebuilding we can do in homes, that they know God. Through knowing the word of God, by establishing it, they will have love for their neighbor, their children, crime will be lessened. Crime will decrease. They won't steal because they know what's right from wrong,' he tells us. This instills values among family members of 'respecting their parents, how they respect their children, how they respect their neighbors. Through this, we establish that God is watching them, that there is a God who is recording what they're doing.'

Peacebuilding for some of our participants begins in the family. A Foursquare Gospel Church pastor Sultan Kudarat province narrates how the barangay captain (village chief) asked him to mediate in a family dispute related to the financial support for elderly parents.

When I went there, what I did was I gave advice to the women, to the children. Yes, parental guidance. After that, the [barangay] captain said, 'let's hear what Pastor has to say.' So, that's what I did. I gave the Word of God, Proverbs 22:6, 'train up your child so that wherever they go, they will fear the Lord.' And 'to respect their parents,' Ephesians 6:1. 'Obey your parents in the Lord for this is right.' Also, in other chapters, which said that if we obey and respect our parents, our life will grow abundantly and be good, their children will live a long life. So, I said, 'who wants their children to have a long life? And who wants their children to have a short life?' So, they raised their hands and said, 'we, Pastor, we want that.' So, respect your parents so that you will receive that.

After preaching to the siblings and praying for them, the parents and their children hugged and cried, according to the pastor. His intervention resulted in a written agreement outlining the terms of payment.

They signed a document indicating that they will support their parents by giving 250 pesos monthly. [That's] 10 families [siblings]. No more problem. Their father see now has money every month. So, there. They now have peace. Because back then, they said one child will give blessing [food] to their father. Then the other children will eat at their father's. So the next day, there is no more food for their father, for their mother. So when their [parents] ask the [child], s/he will say, 'we don't have anymore.' They will say, 'I have already given.' So, that's what I mean by, a good facilitator or good connector [is] to build peace, to be a peacebuilder. Because for the children, it's trouble. For the parents, trouble. That's all I can say as Good News.

A pastor of the mainline Protestant United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) based in Cagayan de Oro, also considers her involvement in peacebuilding as 'handling the relational problems within the members, in the family' and organizing community involvement activities to avoid such problems.

An academic and peacebuilding practitioner based at the Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology, notes how family and domestic dynamics are overlooked in issues of peace, conflict, and security.

It's a systemic problem that it is happening in the environment that we're living in. Like there's [...] basically the lack of respectful communication at home, that there is no [...] communicative way of how aggressive behavior are to be channeled through by the child, be it the male or the female. So when he grows up, when he has a family, that's where he projects his aggressive behavior, violent behavior, and sometimes it could really [...] lead to a crime like harassment, you know, in the workplace, at home, in the public spaces.

In these cases, the family is seen as the beginning of peace in society. For some of our local faith actors, this harmony is preserved when family members fulfill their prescribed duties and responsibilities as written in sacred scripture and divinely mandated. This reflects the privileged place of the family—recognized by the Constitution as the 'foundation of the nation'—in Philippine society. Before moving on to the next section, we wish to note that this privileging is double-edged. While the family and its corresponding imagery—the home—are often valorized, they are also images of suffering. Indeed, the stories recounted above narrate moments of restoration and recovery. But this may not be the case for many others. At our stakeholders' workshop, one of our participants from his university's peace center raises an important question: 'Which home?' He poses it after several others before him noted repeatedly that 'peace is our home.'

Intrareligious, interreligious and intercultural peace

Mindanao is home to the country's most culturally diverse regions. Cities such as Zamboanga, Cagayan de Oro, and Iligan are melting pots where people of different faiths and indigenous traditions have coexisted for centuries.

For citizens and advocates alike, peace means keeping this delicate balance. It is no surprise then that many organized local peacebuilding groups have emerged in Mindanao in response to issues of violent conflict, exploitation, and economic deprivation. Some of our peacebuilders have had extensive peacebuilding experience in their respective communities. An Evangelical pastor has ministered to indigenous peoples (IPs) in Bukidnon province. Part of his ministry is mediation. He shares one instance when he had to mediate after foreign researchers working with a local university damaged

trees considered sacred by the IPs. He facilitated talks between the university and the IPs, which included performing traditional ceremonies to atone for the offense.

A peacebuilder based in Zamboanga has been involved in the peacebuilding movement since the 1990s, which he described as the 'height of the crisis in Mindanao.' One of their most significant interreligious engagements in the city was in response to the 2017 Marawi Siege. According to him, 'biases and prejudices were focused on the Muslim communities' during this time, and others perceived the madrasahs and masjids as 'breeding ground of terrorists.' The activity had a positive impact because these rumors were dispelled. 'In fact, when we held the first ever open house, the masjid, madrasah, and church were just next to each other. When we invited their parish priest, he said, 'we have

been neighbors for 20 years but I just entered now and then I've seen that you are like this, and we are all the same,' he recounted. A young peacebuilder working in Marawi, recounted organizing similar exposure activities: 'Christians go to masjid or mosque and observe the prayer of the Muslims. And Muslims are invited to a Christian mass wherein they're able to share during the homily.'

In recent years, however, evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal Christian churches have sprouted all over the island. Divisions within the church could result in a split and the establishment of another church in the same area. Our evangelical Christian participants from three distinct regions in Mindanao—Zamboanga in the west, Sultan Kudarat in the south, and Bukidnon in the central part—have similarly noted the

tendency to compete with fellow pastors for members and resources to run their churches. Notably, these churches are also active participants in local government and police programs, as they are able to utilize the platform to perform their mission and establish access with authorities. Unlike the more established religious groups such as the Catholics and mainline Protestants, their churches do not have the advantage of a huge or consistent membership base and connection to a centralized governing body that could support their operations. Notably, this is also common in other countries where Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are on the rise, such as in Brazil. Our participants who belong to these churches mentioned the need to become connectors to their fellow pastors in order to preserve unity and work towards the common good of their communities.

Peace as shalom (wholeness) and jihad (struggle)

In the course of our workshops and interviews, our participants invoked theological concepts to refer to peace. Two words in particular cropped up: shalom and jihad. A woman pastor of the mainline Protestant United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), articulated peace during the first workshop as shalom, the Hebrew greeting commonly translated as 'peace.' A more precise translation, however, is 'wholeness' or 'well-being.' Quoting sacred scripture, she explains that their work of peacebuilding is anchored in their belief that human beings are made in the image of God, and thus, '[inasmuch] as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, [you have done it unto me]' (Matthew 25:40). This is reflected in UCCP's institutional focus on social justice, specifically 'justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.'

This 'holistic' view of peace is evident in the worldview of our other religious leaders. We interviewed an evangelical pastor based in Bukidnon. Apart from his work as a pastor, he is involved too in various activities with coffee farmers. When asked to explain, he shares with us his 'holistic' framework of peace. For him peace is about being in 'harmony with your Creator,' but it also means 'spiritual transformation.' He then goes on to say that 'peace means harmony with your being, psychosocial transformation; peace means harmony with others, that is sociopolitical transformation; peace means harmony with God's creation, economic, ecological transformation.' Agreeing with him is a pastor who is involved in the youth ministry at her local UCCP church. For her, God's will for humanity is 'to experience the fullness of life here on earth.' This entails 'empower[ing] people...whatever their status is in life, [so

that] they would not lose hope that they also experience the good life that the Lord has given us.'

Among our Muslim participants, we heard 'jihad' deployed a few times. For an academic and peacebuilding practitioner at Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology after Institute, peace is not 'an end goal,' but a 'lived experience' and a 'journey of how

you rediscover other pieces of yourself.' This journey, she says, is 'jihad,' or 'a lifetime struggle.' Contrary to the 'fleeting' idea of 'inner peace,' which may lead to passivity in the face of injustice, this struggle is characterized 'by having the courage to really confront the status quo, [and say that] 'this is unacceptable, this is something that's not normal.'

Peace as safe space

Another theme that has emerged in our workshops and interviews is peace as safe space. For some of our participants, a safe space is an environment where they can fully express themselves without fear of judgment. This in keeping with extant literature on safe spaces, which also calls into question the concept's limits and practicalities (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019).

A queer participant who worked as a young peacebuilder with the Redemptorist order of the Catholic Church in the wartorn city of Marawi, tells us that aside from 'activities that people do [to address conflict], her definition of peace is a safe space, which begins 'within yourself.' She tells us that one has to 'evaluate' their inner self whether one feels safe in order to attain peace. This statement echoes what we recounted above as peace as an interior disposition.

Peace as safe space is much evident in our engagement with our participants who are involved in the complicated work of gender and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). In Mindanao and elsewhere, religious groups still espouse traditional beliefs on gender, such as patriarchal leadership marriage, and the gender binary. The tension between community norms, familial

expectations, and an individual's need for self-expression thus necessitates the need for a safe space. Such spaces are needed more than ever as tensions have already led to violence and several hate crimes against the LGBTQI+ community. This includes the 2021 bombing of a volleyball game which killed one and injured seven people in Datu Piang, Maguindanao province in the Bangsamoro region (Bangsamoro Parliament, 2021).

ILAW Shared Community (see case study box), is based in the multicultural city of Iligan, and has been at the forefront of fostering such spaces for conversations and community. Their organization is focused on the youth, who are most aware and affected by the tensions between traditional culture and the rapid changes of contemporary society. Their activities have gathered diverse young people of different religions, backgrounds, and sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE). Talking to some of ILAW's members and participants, they defined peace as 'safe space,' a 'companion' and 'second family' where 'everyone is open-minded and supportive,' and considered the organization as one.

Peace as personal, political, and economic security

Many of our participants have cited poverty as the main issue affecting their communities. Economic exploitation, government abuse, and violent conflict have all contributed to worsening the poverty situation in Mindanao. A veteran woman peacebuilder affiliated with the Catholic archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro, points to the root cause of conflict: 'If there are conflict areas, what is the real reason that there is conflict? So if you remove the outer layer of the map, you will notice that there are really circumstantial problems. And what are the problems? Food, roads, water, electricity, education.' For decades, a host of local, religious, and institutional non-government organizations have been working to fill in these basic needs in the absence of effective social services in Mindanao. 'I know you will tell them that they are rebels, and you will run after them, because they may not be able to say they are against the government [because] the government is not there at all,' she tells us.

Thus, it is no surprise that our participants come from organizations working on different sectors involved in the 'triple nexus' areas of humanitarian action, development work, and peace. For instance, the participant mentioned in the preceding paragraph has been continuously involved in all three areas, working with the archdiocese in responding and mediating conflict situations, and forming volunteers and leaders who could implement social development programs in communities. One participant who is affiliated with the Arnold Janssen Catholic Mission Foundation is working to provide alternative education to remote communities in the Muslim-majority areas of Marawi City and Butig town in Lanao del Sur province. They cater to students aged 13 to 60, given the lack of access to formal education in these areas. 'As you know, one of our areas is the municipality of

Butig. And basically, Butig is labeled as the 'home of the terrorists,' the Maute group who destroyed Marawi City. So, that is one reason why we are not letting go and leaving the municipality of Butig, particularly the remote areas that we cater to. It is because [we are there to help them in] instilling peace within themselves because they are zero literate. And accordingly, the people who are easy to recruit in violent extremism are the people with zero knowledge,' he tells us. In this way, they are 'trying to address at an early stage [...] the possibility of them being recruited into violent extremism by integrating peace education' in the alternative learning program that they are implementing.

Fulfilling basic needs is also needed post-conflict, especially for the displaced and refugees. Ako Bakwit, established after the Marawi Siege in 2017, is an organization that addresses and advocates for the rights of the bakwit, a Filipino colloquial term for evacuees (which evolved from the English word, 'evacuate') or internally-displaced persons (IDPs). Their activities are not just based in Mindanao, but even in other parts of the country including the capital Manila, where some IDPs from Marawi have settled. The organization's founder and president tells us that 'in the history of internal displacement, peace transcends beyond the meaning itself. Because as long as you're IDP, when you're dealing with livelihood, how to get by each day, when you're dealing with transferring from one house to the other in order to find shelter, [...] there's no peace.' Thus, he emphasizes the need for peace 'in the sense that you have inner peace and peace of mind,' in terms of self and economic security. For an Ako Bakwit member, however, a Maranao based in Manila, ties the idea of inner peace to strengthening one's faith.

A senior Islamic scholar in Marawi whom we interviewed, succinctly defines peace as living the 'good life':

A good life is not, it doesn't mean that you're rich. It means that you can eat three times a day. It means that you're not afraid. You're not afraid that when someone pressures you to do something, whether it's right or wrong, you're asked to do it... When we get to that point where people, whether they're rich or not, whether they have money or not, they can say what's wrong and what's good, and they have nothing to be afraid of, you can say that there's peace in the community. When [you're still thinking] of the person that you're afraid of, the mayor or governor, you still can't say that there's peace in that community. [...] [W]hen we talk about peace, you can live happily, peacefully, you're not afraid. You can truly feel peace in your community.

Case studies

ILAW and the Role of Faith in Peacebuilding

Introduction

This section turns to ILAW Shared Community as a case study to demonstrate how faith plays a vital role in peacebuilding. What is interesting about ILAW is that their peacebuilding work is linked to their advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

In the Philippines, religious conservatism often leads SRHR advocates to frame their work using secular principles like public health and well-being. This approach helps them avoid conflict with religious groups, especially when addressing LGBTQ+ rights. Our case study, however, reveals that faith is a strong driver for ILAW's SRHR advocates. ILAW (which means 'light' in Filipino) is a non-governmental organization well-known for its SRHR advocacy in Iligan, a city in Mindanao with diverse cultures and religions. ILAW conducts various youth-focused activities related to HIV health screenings, workshops on gender equality, and other learning sessions on early pregnancy and sexual abuse. ILAW focuses on HIV prevention due to a recent increase in HIV/AIDS cases in the community. Reports suggest a link between rising HIV cases, mental health issues, and discrimination faced by People Living with HIV (PLHIV) and the LGBTQ+ community (Buenafe, 2022). Despite their crucial work, ILAW's efforts often face stigma and religious bias related to HIV/AIDS and the LGBTQ+ community (Buenafe, 2022). ILAW started as an informal support network for people living with HIV before officially becoming an organization in 2017. Iligan, where ILAW operates, is an HIV hotspot in the Philippines. As of June 2024, approximately 2,078 individuals with HIV in Region X (Northern Mindanao) were receiving antiretroviral therapy.

Since 1984, the region has confirmed 3,555 HIV cases, but it's estimated that around 6,000 people in Northern Mindanao may have HIV, with only 55% diagnosed (Quilinguing, 2024). For its many engagements, ILAW is a highly respected organization, collaborating actively with the local youth council and the city's AIDS Council. It has received both local and national recognition, including the National Kabayanihan Challenge Awards for community service.

We interviewed thirteen individuals involved with ILAW in late 2024. Participants were chosen based on their level of engagement. Seasoned members are those who joined between 2017-2021 when the organization was set up. Newer members are those who joined afterwards. We also interviewed partners and individuals who have participated in ILAW's various workshops. This selection allowed us to gather diverse perspectives, from those who witnessed ILAW's early development to newer college-aged youth and external collaborators. These interviews provided valuable insights into their motivations for peacebuilding, their commitment to SRHR advocacy, and the role of faith in their work. In what follows, we focus on how faith drives their work as peacebuilders: Faith demands recognition, faith demands mutual respect, and faith demands safe spaces.

Faith demands recognition

ILAW has been prompted to directly engage with religious matters for several reasons. Kaps, one of ILAW's leaders, admits that the organization is not 'very deep in terms of spirituality.' However, he believes ILAW should address 'the conflict that is happening in communities and between people.' For Kaps, it is crucial for ILAW to recognize that sexuality and reproductive health are in fact moral and religious issues.

One major challenge is the dominant conservative views on sexuality among religious leaders in Iligan. Jacob, an ILAW member, recounts how some Catholic priests have misconceptions about sexuality. When ILAW tried to partner with local parishes, priests reportedly told them that altar servers would not participate in ILAW's youth activities because they 'might supposedly 'catch' being queer.' Caleb, a 25-year-old ILAW officer, acknowledges that the organization has limited experience engaging with the religious sector and anticipates such interactions will be 'difficult.' Similarly, Ellie, 18, observes that 'heavily religious people' often feel 'weirded out' by what they consider 'taboo' topics like abortion and safe sex.

These observations align with existing research highlighting the ongoing tension between faith groups and SRHR issues (Vik et al., 2013). In the Philippines, conservative Christian groups are known for hindering SRHR policy advancements. Examples include their strong opposition to the Reproductive Health Law in 2012, their continuous resistance to the two-decade-old SOGIESC Equality Bill (anti-discrimination bill) (Cornelio and Dagle, 2019), and their recent success in stopping the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies.

Interestingly, ILAW members themselves draw strength from their own religious

convictions. Their approach is not to directly challenge conservative theological views but rather to emphasize compassion for those affected by these religious leaders. One member, who is living with HIV, views his work with ILAW as a direct response to God's call:

In fact, my HIV diagnosis was my turning point in getting back to the Lord in cultivating my faith. Because I know that sometimes God allows things to happen in the life of a person. I don't believe that God gave it to me. Of course, it's still my own doing. But it has been allowed because of a greater message or a greater responsibility that He wants to... that my parent God would want to build up communities, build up relationships, despite challenges and issues, not just HIV. [...] Look for the message of light because that's not a dead end. There is always a way out, and there's always a way to change the situation.

This approach embodies Kaps's vision for ILAW's engagement with the religious sector. Other members have also come to recognize the importance of a faith-based approach despite the difficulties. Caleb, an ILAW officer, acknowledges the 'crucial' role of faith in shaping attitudes toward sexual and reproductive health. He states, 'If possible, it would be a big help if the religious sector would coordinate in advocating SRHR.' Roe, 22, a young member, believes that religious actors' hesitation stems from misconceptions about SRHR advocates, such as assuming they are sexually active. She emphasizes, 'It's about time that we open up to a sector that is very sensitive. It will build more peace, it will connect us, and it will strengthen us...so that both religious and non-religious sectors can unite for a better cause.'

Faith demands mutual respect

Cultivating an environment of mutual respect begins with awareness, according to ILAW's members. The organization does this by conducting seminars on sexual and reproductive health. These activities are usually geared towards young people. To reach this key demographic, ILAW has partnered with the Sangguniang Kabataan (youth council) of barangays (villages) and educational institutions in Iligan, some of which are managed by religious organizations. The personal relationships that ILAW members have built have enabled such activities, even in educational institutions run by the religious sector, which would usually avoid such controversial topics as gender identity and equality.

Some ILAW members have also shared the insights they learned from their organization with their families and friends, opening up important conversations about SRHR. Jacob, 21, a younger member, said that these interactions with his family and friends helped them to 'gradually unlearn' misconceptions about sexual and reproductive health and their homophobic attitudes. These encounters, in turn, made him more patient with each person's journey. 'I can't say that after [I] talk to homophobic participants, they would immediately be converted. But I am hoping that after that conversation, they would slowly unlearn the things that they should,' Jacob said.

Mutual respect, when defined by ILAW's members, resonates with the 'do-no-harm' principle, which ensures that any action or intervention must actively prevent or lessen any adverse effects (Interpeace, 2010). This is evident in ILAW members' attitudes to religious differences and their use of DNH terminologies. When asked about what he does whenever he encounters homophobic remarks during an ILAW activity, Jacob tells us that he 'doesn't shame or pinpoint that person.' Instead, he addresses the concern in a general manner and engages the person in a 'sincere conversation' after the activity. He says that he 'tries to put [himself] first in their shoes,' as the person's beliefs 'might be influenced by the patriarchal society.' Jannie, 23, a new member, says that ILAW taught them respect, which meant that 'we cannot harm anyone's beliefs and practices.' For Roe, this mutual understanding allows for finding 'common ground.' 'I think in that way, we realize that despite the differences, there is a connection. Maybe, if we have mutual understanding, we won't judge each other's beliefs,' she tells us.

Faith demands safe spaces

A core tenet of ILAW's peacebuilding is creating safe spaces where everyone can freely participate without fear of exclusion. Research indicates that this freedom is crucial for people of diverse views, faiths, and ethnicities to connect and overcome ingrained misconceptions (Conciliation Resources, 2018). ILAW members also recognize that having a safe space to practice one's faith is vital for social integration, as the social environment significantly impacts the successful integration of one's sexual and religious identity (Evangelista et al., 2016). Given Iligan's diverse faiths, ILAW strives to be such a space. This is why our interviewees define peace as not just the absence of conflict, but as an environment where they can freely express themselves.

This manifests in several ways. For Gabriel, who identifies as gay, ILAW is a place where 'nobody has to hide their true identity.' He tells us that, 'If your expression is feminine, you are accepted, we still love you. If your expression is like this, it's really okay for us.' Roe tells us that, speaking in a mix of English and Visayan, 'safe mi magpakabayot diri [it's safe to be queer here].' For others a space is safe if it fosters emotional support. Ethan is a seasoned gay member. He finds ILAW a place where he can share all his problems 'with no judgment and all,' and ask for help. He describes his friends at ILAW as 'my second family...they've helped me achieve peace of mind.' Kevin echoes this, sharing that 'a thorn from my heart was removed because I was able to share my own experience. I am so proud of myself that I was able to share in public.' This has led him to feel 'so very proud of myself that I'm not alone in this fight.'

Transforming ILAW into a safe space is a commitment. They actively ensure 'no stigma, no stereotyping, no degrading slurs' occur within the organization. Roe, who manages members and volunteers, stresses this point, also highlighting its personal significance for her. Having grown up in a religiously conservative family, she found ILAW to be a 'safe space,' a 'companion,' and a place where she could accept herself, noting, 'Everyone is open-minded and supportive.'

2.2 How are 'spiritual' or 'intangible' resources mobilized for peacebuilding?

In this section, we return to one of the project's research questions: How are 'spiritual' or 'intangible' resources mobilized for peacebuilding? Based on the various activities we have conducted in the Philippines, we highlight two emerging ideas. The first is that peacebuilding is motivated by our religious leaders' faith and values. The second is that they can draw on their traditional authority to influence the shape of peacebuilding in their respective communities.

The work of peacebuilding is motivated by LFAs' faith and values

The Philippines is consistently found to be a profoundly religious country by survey firms and social scientists. About 79% of Filipinos identify as Catholic, while about 6% are Muslim, and around 14% belong to other Christian denominations and religions (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Fewer than 50,000 Filipinos identified as a 'none,' or having no religion. Just last February 2025, the Pew Research Center released a report on religious nationalism, which found that 81% of Filipinos favor the Bible to have some form of influence on national legislation. The same report finds 73% of Filipinos associate Christianity as 'very essential' to being Filipino, the highest among all Christian nations surveyed.

It is thus no surprise that faith, religion, and spirituality are profoundly influential for our participants. In relation to our project's overall interest in the 'intangible' dimensions of peacebuilding, their beliefs are the very source and driving force behind the work that they do.

How are their beliefs articulated? Throughout the workshops and interviews, religious leaders drew on sacred scripture to articulate the reason for their peacebuilding work. Some examples cited were Saint Paul's exhortation to 'live at peace with everyone' (Romans 12:18) in the Christian Bible, and to 'enjoin what is good, and forbid what is wrong,' as mentioned in the Quran and hadiths of Islam. One participant during the DNHFG workshop notes how the Islamic hadith already mentions the principle: 'Do not cause harm or return harm. Whoever harms others, Allah will harm him. Whoever is harsh with others, Allah will be harsh with him.' A teacher who coordinates Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in his school district in Cotabato City cites sacred scripture as his source of motivation in the work he does.

Yes, there is a verse in the Qur'an. I just can't remember the specific chapter and verse, but God said, God is the one who will give protection or guidance to him so that he will succeed in what he is doing now. So always begin with God as the one who will give protection or guidance to him so that he will succeed in what he is doing now. So that's the message of that verse...So that's where you will succeed in God if you believe in Him.

Others have mentioned creeds or documents spelling out their institutions' beliefs. A mainline Protestant pastor, for instance, refers to their statement of faith as the basis of their work: 'the Kingdom of God is present where faith in Jesus Christ is shared, where healing is given to the sick, where food is given to the hungry, where light is given to the blind, where liberty is given to the captives and oppressed.'

Apart from sacred scripture and creeds, some others also alluded to prayer (and the personal relationship with the divine that prayer nourishes) as a way of sustaining their work as peacebuilders. During an interview, a youth peacebuilder from the Redemptorist church in Iligan, shares during an interview that their relationship with God deepened in the course of helping others.

Because if you are working with the heart, if you are working with the heart, then they will reciprocate what [your heart] gives. So, their struggles as an individual, I will also be tested on how to solve it. Like, 'Lord, how do I solve it?' But eventually, if I ask for it, my relationship with God has been deepened. Because I pray everyday, like, 'Lord, please help them, Lord. Please don't help me because someone else needs it.' So, my relationship with the Lord has been deepened. So, they are also able to help me.

Beyond the practical need for income, some are also driven by the promise of eternal rewards. An educator from Marawi, explains his motivation: 'For example, in our program, Alternative Learning System, we have a belief that the knowledge that you can share with a person, you will also gain that reward in the hereafter.' Similarly, a peacebuilder-academic from Iligan is motivated by her desire to be remembered after her death. She believes 'Our time on earth is borrowed time. So when it's our time to go, then we are willing to go because we would say I've spent a good life here on earth. And I want to harvest that in the afterlife.' Both highlight that their work is not solely for earthly gain but also for the spiritual rewards they anticipate in the afterlife.

All of these narratives illustrate how the language of belief is widely shared in the context of peacebuilding in the Philippines. It is a common language understood and appreciated even in bridging differences. Many of our participants who have been involved in peacebuilding and conflict mediation are deeply aware of how to effectively and sensitively deploy this shared language. One example is from our conversation with a pastor from Bukidnon. The following is a lengthy but engaging excerpt on his approach of finding common ground between his own Christian beliefs and those of the indigenous peoples:

We will just talk about preaching, more on Christian leading, how to live peacefully. That's it. We will not talk about doctrines, as if, for some they can't accept. We will not talk about that. When we face the tribes, we listen to them. For example, I talked to their head. I said, 'I am a pastor, I am a Christian. You are part of a tribe. I want to know who is Magbabaya (Supreme Creator). We are Cebuanos, we

call the creator God. For you, what do you call your creator?' They said, 'Magbabaya.' So who is Magbabaya? For me, it's like a general revelation, who God or the Creator is. After that, because they have rituals, of course, we respect their rituals. For us, because I have a training about Asian theology, so I have read about these rituals. I have also read that in the Bible. In the Old Testament, we have rituals, they also have their rituals. They said [they] don't have a book, they don't have a Bible. I said, 'so how did you know about these?' Of course, they have a story similar to Noah. They have a similar kind of story to Noah. I said, 'how did you know that?' How did you know that this ritual, instead of killing each other, let's just do a ritual. Let's just slay a pig or chicken. Or it depends on what is available. Both parties. That is what will be killed. Then our hands, we will lay it on the pig, or cow, or chicken, or goat. Then it will be killed. So, whatever offense there was on both sides, we will lay it on the animal. Then we will kill it. Because to reconcile, blood needs to be shed. [...] So that is their solution. I also agreed that it is right. Although, the specific revelation or the concept about salvation, that Jesus Christ came, that the Father loved us, they don't have that. For me, it doesn't matter if they don't reach that point. I cannot force them [to believe that]. [...] We have these wonderful fellowship of sharing their beliefs, and then our beliefs, like that.

Another example of how beliefs are deployed in peacebuilding is from our conversation with the leader of the ILAW Shared Community in Iligan. Talk of faith and religion is still considered taboo in the context of SRHR programs and counseling. He is mindful of this. However, there are times when he utilizes faith messages to impart hope and encouragement.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. As long as if I'm the speaker, then yes. If the speaker is different, then I will also allow, the organization will allow. As long as you are there, you are free. And we are empowered enough not to contradict what they're saying because it's a sign of being disrespectful. But for me, if I'm the one being the speaker, I always, aside from the faith messages, I always insert verses from the Bible whom I believe that are empowering enough to, if not all, but to some.

INTERVIEWER: For example, sir, what are the verses that you usually use, depending on the context?

PARTICIPANT:

Like for example, I tried the Lord's [inaudible] mentioned in Psalm 23, in terms of, what is this called? In times when you're challenged, although, for HIV patients, people who are living with HIV, 'even though I walk in the valley of death, I will fear no evil.' And 'love God with all your heart, with all your soul.' Common verses that I can, if there is an opportunity. Sometimes I look for [verses], and I say I don't impose that this is it. I say this is my belief in the Christian Bible that I believed. Just allow me to share this. Like that. So if there are those who will accept, or whatever their beliefs are, they still listen.

Such explicit, almost casual, references to faith and religion may still be considered as beyond the usual norms in institutional peacebuilding and conflict mediation especially in other contexts. This comes from the perceived role of faith in radicalization, polarization, and othering, which could impede any meaningful effort to find common ground. The suspicion is, of course, not unfounded. Some of our participants have experienced firsthand how beliefs are also deployed to encourage discrimination or violence. In the case of his work in SRHR, the indigenous belief of gaba (bad karma) was seen as the cause of diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

They have already been judged, because of the wrong understanding of the community on what sexual and reproductive health is all about. For example, those who are diagnosed with HIV, they are thought to have had bad karma (gabaan) because you are like this, you are like that. So, the usual. And in our organization, sir, it's very challenging because sometimes we are being mocked as biased, because sometimes they tag us as supporters of the policies against the community, against, for example, the old people, the elders, and so on. But we are trying to correct them that even though we have [an] advocacy, we are just there to guide and to walk those people who have issues and concerns in terms of SRHR.

Authority of traditional and religious leaders in the local community

The Philippine state is officially secular. In reality, however, religion continues to play a significant role in public life and even matters of state. This is evident on all levels of government and civil society—from the highest levels of the executive branch to the local government units where civil society organizations are often represented.

The BARMM, a self-governing regional government whose population is more than 90% Muslim, and whose history is borne out of the Moro people's struggle, professes to be guided by 'moral governance.' A local alim or religious scholar based in Marawi, is 'religious' and 'based in Islam.' Yet he frames this in more concrete terms: when applied, moral governance will eradicate corruption, which for Amate is the biggest stumbling block to development. could eradicate corruption. He refers to the rule of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, an eighth-century caliph known for his 'decisive' action against corruption and poverty, as an example for what moral governance can achieve.

So, this means, when we say religious, there's less corruption. So, where else? This should really be eradicated. Because corruption is the root issue here. Corruption in infrastructure. Corruption in education. Because the kids who don't have connections, they can't apply. They can't avail scholarships. They can't avail, they can't apply. How many thousands have finished the entrance exams? How many eventually get in? Because there's no connection. If you don't have a connection, you'll find a connection. Then they'll say, 'you need this.' Like this. So, it's really hard. So, that's what we really need... We need to eliminate corruption from BARMM, regional to barangay level. Because as long as corruption is there, we won't progress.

An academic and peacebuilding practitioner at Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology, articulates moral governance as principles found in Islamic sacred scripture, but also as universal values shared by all faiths.

Leadership, public office is a divine trust, and so...as public officials, they are bound to do better and especially because the principle now of the BARMM is moral governance, and moral governance as defined by the Holy Book, by the Qur'an is at most, integrity, doing the right thing. Because you are accountable to God and not just to your fellow human being, honesty, because that's where you earn respect. And very importantly, is service-oriented leadership, that you treat power as a responsibility and not just as a privilege to be entitled. So that aspect of vertical or political accountability as well.

Moral governance, even if it is the Bangsamoro regional government's guiding principle, remains to be a challenge in practice. For the alim in Marawi, their role is to remind the

community and even their fellow religious leaders to remain true to this precept and avoid the temptations of political power and influence.

We've mentioned it to our constituents, the imams, the ulama. Let us not allow the political situation, even if we're not the ones in power, being an imam, being a religious leader, the spiritual aspect should still be there. We shouldn't sacrifice, whoever is sitting there, whoever is sitting there, we should stick to our beliefs. Being a religious leader, whether you're an imam or ustads, or ulama, we should be strict with [our beliefs]. It isn't bad to be friends with leaders, politicians. But let's not sacrifice our being religious leaders.

Muslim scholars are not the only sources of moral and religious authority in the Bangsamoro. As the region is composed of Islamized tribal groups such as the Maranao, traditional leaders also play a significant role. A participant who was enthroned as datu-a-bae of her community in Marawi, says that among the roles that she plays are settling family feuds (rido), looking after the welfare of her community, and even building madrasas and masjids.

An esteemed religious scholar from Marawi describes a complementary relationship between Islamic and traditional leaders. For instance, disputes may be resolved through the traditional Maranao way, rather than the harsher Muslim way. He gives the following example.

PARTICIPANT: For example, a killing happened between two families. But if you bring them to Islam, it means that if someone was killed, then someone needs to die too. The other family won't agree to that.

INTERVIEWER: So that's how it is in Islam?

PARTICIPANT: That's how it really is in Islam. If you bring them to the court, it's different. They can be sentenced to life. Life sentence. It's difficult. So if you go through the traditional Maranao way, it's possible that the one who killed will give some sort of, what you call this, payment. We don't call it payment. You'll give 'kanduri' to the bereaved family.

INTERVIEWER: Like blood money?

PARTICIPANT: But we don't consider it blood money. We don't use that term. Because it sounds obscene. If you say blood money, it seems you sold your siblings' blood. We have a term so that we don't use blood money. Because if you say blood money, the other side will get angry. So what we do is 'kanduri.'

INTERVIEWER: There's a payment?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, kanduri. But the traditional [leaders] already know the right kanduri to give. They're the ones giving the limit, that it doesn't exceed or won't go lower than this amount. It's institutional.

INTERVIEWER: Who sets it?

PARTICIPANT: The traditional [leaders.]

INTERVIEWER: The traditional leaders? The sultans. The ba'i a...

PARTICIPANT: The ba'i a labi. They're the ones who find a way. Because it's easy for them to connect. Because in the families, the traditional people are in the middle. 'So what will you do? You will also kill? You know that your grandfather is a sibling...' So like that. They go through these channels.

Our Evangelical Christian interlocutors are also exercising their influence over their own local governments. Some of them are actively participating in government-initiated 'moral recovery programs' by preaching to the police and municipal staff.

For instance, in the words of a pastor from Zamboanga, who teaches 'values' at the police camp every Thursday, 'I teach them that we should be God-centered. That we should be family-based. [...] That we should be service-oriented,' he tells us. 'We can't do these things if we don't have enough knowledge about the word of God.' He gives a concrete example of his preaching's effect on the cops.

So, through giving the word of God to them, praise God, [one cop said], 'pastor, I'm not going to the cockpit [cockfighting ring] anymore.' 'I'm not going to the cockpit.' So, me too, I'm happy because, I said, 'Lord, if I didn't go to them, maybe they'll stay like this, go on their duty, receive their salary, then go home to their families, some won't even go home because they'll go to their... because that's their only happiness that they'll be with their comrades. So, through giving in the word of God, I saw the results [on] the way they think.

He believes ministering to the police is important because they are the 'ones who implement the law,' and thus, they should be the ones 'who must set a good example, first to the family, [then] to the community.'

A Christian pastor from Sultan Kudarat, sees maintaining close and potentially mutually-beneficial relationships with local government officials as part of his church's ministry.

But when I read our vision in Foursquare [Church] to 'enlarge your ministry in community,' how can you reach [out] if you don't have a connection to the [barangay] captain? How can you reach [them] if you don't have a connection to the governor? So you should reach them, the closeness should be there so you can insert your program. Because the ministry as a pastor [is] not only in the church, not only to your members, but in that community. That's why according to the Bible, according to the Bible, 'preach the gospel in Jerusalem.' Jerusalem means in your house. Judea means in your community, and the [outermost] part of that means Sultan Kudarat or [the] Philippines. Spread out the word of God. So how can you spread [the word] in the municipality if you don't have a connection?

He tells us that some have questioned his relationship with the mayor and accused him of politicking. To this, he says that they maintain this closeness in order to 'share his experience with God, how His love is.' One time, the pastor prayed over their mayor who 'cannot sleep' because of her 'troubled mind.' He recounts that this prayer had helped the mayor ease her anxieties. 'You can't do everything, you can't solve everything. [...] [So] give it to God, and when you give it to God, the Lord will intervene there. So before you go there, they are at peace. It's already solved,' he tells us.

This relationship is not just exclusive to a single church or a pastor. Individual Evangelical churches are typically part of a group which engages with the local government. In the pastor's case, his church is part of the Bagumbayan Interreligious Association (BIMRA), which was developed nine years ago and was championed by the current mayor through an ordinance. It was created to ensure the accessibility of the religious leaders. Around 67 pastors are part of BIMRA. Among their activities are convocation programs at the municipality's Local Development Office every first Friday of the month. Together with the local government, BIMRA has created modules which discuss their organization's core values, which include intimacy with God, cultural understanding, stewardship, family priority, multiplication of leaders, transformation of leadership, and integrity. These modules are distributed to barangay leaders and teachers for their use. While BIMRA's continuity is dependent on the commitment of the leaders, measures have been in place to ensure that the leaders are incentivized to participate in regular meetings (e.g. Php 3,000 allowance for attendance).

Despite the local government's active engagement with BIMRA, the pastors we interviewed who were members of BIMRA, maintained that they remain independent from the authorities. Its leaders are not appointed by the mayor but are elected by the members of the association. In managing local issues, one pastor shared that the barangay is thankful for his presence in their community meetings. Before, these meetings would be ridden with conflict among leaders and in turn, no project gets approved. However, when he preached to them about

being chosen by God and the people, they became more grounded. He advised them to simply approve whatever proposals will be helpful to the barangay. In that way, whatever its good results be, their constituents will commend them.

2.3 Conclusion: summing up the implications of the findings for wider peacebuilding efforts

For peacebuilders in the Philippines, many of the findings above are not necessarily new or groundbreaking. Religious leaders have been at the forefront of the peace process for years, fostering spaces for interfaith dialogue and solidarity. But as Mindanao cautiously moves towards a post-conflict context, new challenges related to novel articulations of peace emerge, along with the persistence of old problems. Stakeholders committed to the cause of peace need to pay attention to these concerns—domestic life, health and well-being, gender equality, education, the environment, minority rights—in order to build a more just society for all. Religious leaders' engagement with secular authorities is a common occurrence in the Philippines. In many instances, they are a force for good, acting as mediators, refuge, and moral conscience. By connecting with diverse stakeholders and engaging in the complexities of life in their communities, religious leaders remain grounded and resist compulsions to act primarily as guardians of orthodoxy.

This also spells the need for an intergenerational exchange to sustain peacebuilding efforts in this crucial time. One veteran peacebuilder observed the diminishing importance of faith in younger generations. For our participant, faith was the primary 'intangible' driving force in carrying out their difficult work. These stories of faith and courage, along with practical advice from decades of experience, are important resources that youth can tap into. At the same time, the new generation of peacebuilders can introduce new paradigms and creative ways of addressing emerging issues.

3. Overall reflections and lessons learned



1. Workshops have provided necessary language, tools, and platforms to enrich our participants' work.

A common sentiment among our participants is that the conflict sensitivity toolkit provided by the Do No Harm workshop was a familiar concept, something that they already practiced in their own work. A woman peacebuilder affiliated with the Catholic archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro, said that Do No Harm gave a 'formal name to what I do and what we all do.' 'We all know what peace is, what being a peace builder is, what being a peace person is, and how to become a connector,' she said. A mainline Protestant pastor found resonances and continuity between Do No Harm and the conflict resolution training sessions she had as a pastor. Some have also reframed it using beliefs and concepts familiar to them. It was also, for her, a 'simplified version of

the Golden Rule': to do unto others what you would have them do to you. She compared the Do No Harm principle to her 'mantra': 'If you make a decision, make sure that it's life-giving. So, there are risks, there are dilemmas, some need compromise, but make sure that it's life-giving. And [beneficial] for many, not to the least,' she said.

The workshop also provided our participants a platform for connecting with fellow peacebuilders. Evidence of this was the resonance of the term 'connectors' among our participants after the first workshop. We also observed then how younger peacebuilders were able to learn from and connect with more veteran practitioners. 'That workshop provided more than just a safe space but also brave spaces where we are allowed to express our challenges but also opportunities to how do we empower ourselves first as peacebuilders before we empower our communities,' said an academic from MSU-IIT.

Our participants have also found everyday practicality for the things they learned at the workshop. 'I always think about it when I visit our community. Will you be connector or will you be a divider? That's what we always think about when we engage with the community to provide peace to our community,' said one Islamic scholar based in Marawi. Two educator participants have even used the concepts to effectively navigate bureaucratic processes and the tensions that arise from them. A health advocate from Iligan applied the lessons he learned from the workshop in his organization by introducing this concept to his organization and including it in their programmatic planning (see case study box).



2. Considering the limitations and possible misuse of Do No Harm

Amid the practical applications of Do No Harm, there are emerging critiques of the tool's limitations and even possible abuse, which we observed in the study. One question was whether the principle of Do No Harm can effectively address controversial questions that are deeply embedded in questions of culture and faith. 'You don't want to do harm, but in the process you can inevitably do that because you are conscious in avoiding something that should not be touched,' an academic from Iligan observes. She refers to how the principle of Do No Harm could intentionally or unintentionally impede difficult but necessary conversations such as gender given their sensitive nature. There is a tendency for this to happen, she says, in the 'hierarchical, semi-feudal nature of Philippine society and BARMM' where there is a 'culture of silence and apathy' that is afraid to offend the powerful elite. This, she says, is a 'huge structural impediment' for Do No Harm to be truly effective, lest it be used to discourage critical and dissenting voices. One

possible example of this is in ILAW Shared Community's work. To what extent can they use the Do No Harm approach in conducting SRHR programs, specifically those that include references to gender diversity and equality (e.g. concept of SOGIESC or sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics), in predominantly devout Muslim areas where there is little tolerance for such views?

We also noticed a possible misuse of the Do No Harm principle. One Evangelical pastor's takeaway from the Do No Harm is 'find[ing] a way to have a connection' with other people, regardless of faith. Before, this pastor said that he was ashamed to approach Muslims. But he told us that after the workshop (and also listening to a Baptist preacher who is on a mission to pray for the 'lost people'), he was emboldened to approach them, with the hopes of converting them.

'We went to the park. We approached them. We made friends with them. What is our-- And then we prayed [for] them. They agreed, [even if] they are Muslims. We prayed [for] them. It's one of those activities where instead of being afraid of them, you should not be afraid [of them]. [Instead], you should approach them. You should pray [for] them. You should talk to them. It's like that. Because Zamboanga, they think that Zamboanga City is critical. Actually, the people here are friendly. The Islam [Muslims] are kind. They are kind.'

Given this instance, ensuring the ethical interpretation and application in light of other belief systems will be an important consideration for future program designers, facilitators, and implementers.



3. Notes on the scope of the study

As we previously mentioned, the Philippine study was geographically broader in scope than the ones in Sri Lanka and Burundi. Its field site was essentially the whole island and region of Mindanao—the second largest in the Philippines. One advantage of this was that our participants captured the diversity of peacebuilding contexts in Mindanao—one that goes beyond just violent conflict and extremism. It provides a broad picture of Mindanao in transition as it consolidates the gains of the peace process and navigates through contemporary socio-political and economic challenges. Paying due attention to

these emerging questions will be necessary in strengthening Mindanao's resilience. We acknowledge, however, that there are also significant advantages to narrowing the scope of the study to specific region/s or communities in Mindanao. Aside from more efficient use of resources, this approach would focus the research design on the community context and yield more actionable findings and recommendations. Research staff based in or near the field site would also be more helpful in following up administrative matters and fostering a closer relationship with participants. This is evident in Sri Lanka, where the research assistant was able to physically visit and follow up with participants on their activities. Bringing our participants together physically as well as connectivity issues were among the major challenges in maintaining closer bonds among the group. In this regard, our participants' group chat via Messenger, their preferred platform given the ubiquity of Facebook/Meta in the country, was an effective tool in informing our participants of updates and various external programs/resources which may be helpful to their work.



3.1 Recommendations

We would like to propose the following recommendations in light of the findings from the study, and input from our participants.

For policymakers and government officials



- 1. Enhance and clarify the participation of local religious leaders in local government and community affairs.** A common framework on the religious sector's engagement with government can be developed in light of the varied forms of partnership we have seen in our study (i.e. formation of an interfaith group recognized by authorities, participation of pastors in 'moral recovery programs'). In this manner, religious leaders can become empowered actors in community life, while setting boundaries which ensure the government's equal and fair treatment of all religions.



- 2. Institutionalize interfaith/interreligious activities in the activities and programs of local government.** Local governments can recognize the diversity and contribution of religious convictions in their communities by integrating interreligious engagements in their activities. Such platforms provide an opportunity for all religious groups to get to know each other and collectively engage with government and other sectors of civil society.



- 3. Consider institutionalizing peace/religious education.** We found that interfaith activities are not uniformly institutionalized in educational institutions in the Philippines, despite a 2006 executive order which mandates the mainstreaming of peace education in basic and teacher education (Executive Order 570, 2006). Education authorities can consider integrating interfaith and peace education in the curriculum, including the Do No Harm principle. Educational institutions that already implement peace education may develop programs with relevant government and non-government organizations to pilot and mainstream modules which can be easily scaled and implemented to all schools in the country.

For institutional partners and participants



1. **Conduct training on peacebuilding 'hard skills' (e.g. mediation) for interested participants.** Suggested by one of our participants, World Vision and other peacebuilding organizations can organize training sessions for local religious leaders to enhance their peacebuilding skills necessary for their community work. This includes conceptual frameworks and practical guidelines that local peacebuilders could use.



2. **Maintain and enhance partnership with World Vision, partner universities and organizations to help facilitate local Do No Harm workshops and trainings in participants' local communities.** World Vision can continue engaging with religious leaders to access learning materials and technical help to conduct localized training. Partner universities and organizations can form local hubs for training resources and venues, and for further research activities related to faith and peacebuilding.

Postscript

The Philippine team honors the memory of longtime peacebuilder Vandrazel Birowa, a participant in this study, who passed away in June 2025. His life and legacy are an enduring testament to his kindness, creativity, and persistence. To borrow his words, may he inspire us to be 'counternarratives' to the disorders of greed, conflict, and violence which envelop our world today.

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