

PEACE ZONES: WAR-TORN COMMUNITIES' ATTEMPT OF SELF-PROTECTION



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For too many years civilians on Mindanao have suffered from the hostilities between the military and the armed Muslim separatist movement. Caught in crossfires, being accused of collaborating with one war party or another, being regularly evacuated, living in constant fear and the growing mistrust among mixed communities left behind but one single wish: peace. Eventually, the desperate longing for a peaceful life has mobilized whole communities.

Since the 1970s, government troops and the Muslim separatist movement have been fighting on Mindanao, southern Philippines. The fragile environment favoured the emergence of other conflicts, such as clan conflicts – locally referred to as “ridos” – terrorism, plain banditry, domestic violence and criminality that act within the war. This resulted in an increase in religious tensions and violence as well as a general worsening of the situation. So far the continuous riots are said to have taken 60,000 lives and driven a million people from their homes (Wörtz: 2005). Civilians are frequently forced to stay for months in evacuation camps under inhuman conditions for the sake of their safety. The long term consequences of the fights are disastrous: Not only are the relationships between Muslim and Christian citizens worsening but also their livelihoods are being destroyed. Many people suffer trauma¹.

As a reaction to the situation, an increasing number of communities are declaring their territory as peace zones. They are geared towards handling themselves the local conflicts with nonviolent means and the support of nongovernmental actors. Basically, they request a ceasefire from all the local conflict parties on their territory.

Concept of peace zones

First of all, the establishment of a peace zone begins with consulting the local community. Wishes about the future can be freely expressed by all the members. Meanwhile, negotiations are being entered into with the local armed

parties. The aim is to draw them into officially recognizing the territory as a zone of no violence. If all the parties agree, the declaration of the peace zone is solemnly proclaimed at a so-called declaration workshop. It provides the basis for the communal life and has thus a very strong symbolic meaning.

Important activities to consolidate the peace zone include leadership trainings. Key persons are supposed to be trained in book-keeping and financial management, which should address the need for transparency in financial transactions. Hence, it is aimed for strengthening the confidence of the community to their leaders (Becker: 2009).

Leadership trainings also focus on the basic understanding of democracy. The concept of democracy is indeed very important in a peace zone as it emphasizes the importance of including all the community members on an equal level in the shaping of their community. In order to guarantee the representativity and transparency in the decision-making, multisectoral and multi-ethnic committees are set up (Neumann: 2008). Through this integrative framework, mounting responsibility is assumed by individuals for the succeeding of the peace zone. Alternative conflict resolution mechanisms as well as a team for the monitoring of the ceasefire are also set up to consolidate the zone of peace.

Other vital activities are Culture of Peace Seminars. They encourage the people to face the conflict in the region with a clear understanding of its historical roots. The similarities between Christianity and Islam are highlighted; myths and stereotypes about

1) In 2002, a study involving 1,200 children was conducted in the community of Nalapaan, Cotabato. 94% of the children showed symptoms of traumata, whereof 12% were classified as very severe and 2,8% were found to be survivors of torture.



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the “other” are broken down. The objective is clear: fight prejudices and scrape the community together through interreligious dialogue. In addition, livelihood development projects aim at preventing new conflicts by improving and equalling peoples’ standard of life. A monitoring team regularly evaluates the projects. Many NGO workers agree that this integrated programme is necessary for the continuance of peace zones as people do not talk peace on an empty stomach.

Vulnerability still remains

Despite the involvement of all community members and the ongoing dialogue with conflict parties, peace zones remain vulnerable. They do not have any political power with regards to regional or political decisions and do refuse to

use weapons for their protection. Eventually, they are completely dependent on the willingness of the conflict parties to cooperate. In order to counter this asymmetry between civil society and the armed parties, peace zones focus on networking. By drawing national and international public attention to the area, the armed parties are monitored and thus discouraged from breaking their promises.

Many advocates of the peace zones argue that the peace zones are important initiatives that could eventually bring the long-wanted peace to Mindanao. Many of these people do take the peace zones experience to the table at the national level, yet it is hard to see the connection today between the peace declaration at the local level and the peace process at the national level. Critics especially object that

the community life in a peace zone is more or less disconnected from the national processes and therefore has no influence on the peace negotiations.

Yet a success?

There are many different types of peace zones in Mindanao. They differ in size, organization, location and in the conflicts they are dealing with. As a result, experiences about success and failure are also diverse. While some zones have never ever experienced fights on their territory, others, such as the community of Nalapaan, in the province of Cotabato, suffered from the violation of their peace zone in 2003 when government troops and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) took up weapons. Although disappointed, the community members all agreed that the success laid in the new trust the people had in one another, the lack of fear in staying together and more importantly, the urge to help and support the members of the “other community” (Iyer: 2004).

Moreover, most communities of peace zones claim that violence in general has decreased. Whenever violations occurred, sanctions have been mostly applied and respected. Finally, the assistance provided by NGOs, the barangay and/or the church has led to improvement in their quality of life in economic terms.

The very fact that peace zones are multiplying all over Mindanao proves that the concept is at least well received among the affected communities. ■

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