

**Waltzing with the powerful:
Understanding NGOs in a game of power
in conflict-ridden Mindanao****Jovanie Espesor**

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Abstract

This paper examines the agency of non-government organisations as liberal peace agents and power players in Mindanao—a hybrid political community in the southern Philippines with a legacy of protracted armed conflict. The paper focuses on the mechanisms employed by development NGOs in managing and engaging with formal and informal power-holders, brokers and gatekeepers in conflict-stricken communities. This is an original study that utilises first-hand information gathered through intensive field research in different communities in the southern Philippines. Robust interviews with experts were conducted among local, intermediate and international NGO workers, officials of the Philippine Government, leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, university academics, military leaders, donor agencies and traditional local leaders in Mindanao. Semi-structured interviews were used, most being conducted in Manila and major cities of Mindanao. Ethnographic field observation was also carried out to produce a thick and rich description of the current situation in conflict zones. The paper presents a power map to illustrate the hybrid nature of the socio-political regime, preserved by longstanding conflict. The map sketches the nodes and intensities of power that highlight the dominance of warlord clans in Mindanao.

Keywords: non-government organisation, Mindanao, power, armed conflict, peace, aid

Introduction

Non-government organisations (NGOs) have gained prominence as social-development players in peace operations taking place in the subnational conflict community, Mindanao, in the southern Philippines. NGOs are heavily involved in different phases of the peace process, from high-level diplomacy to facilitation of dialogue at the grassroots. The Philippines hosts diverse kinds and forms of NGO (Cagoco-Guiam, 2004; Hilhorst, 2003) that engage in a wide variety of functions, such as socio-economic development, peacebuilding and conflict resolution, human-rights promotion, environmental protection, emergency relief assistance, and advocacy for political reform and policy changes (Atack, 1999; Hilhorst, 2003). The source of NGOs' authority is the perception that the ordinary people are "agents of democracy, accountability and transparency." The emancipatory character of NGOs as a civic group lies in the notion that they are representing members of marginalised communities (Lehr-Lehnardt, 2005:1), especially the weak and vulnerable (Clark, 1995). Pearce (2011) asserts that the objectives for peacebuilding are probably attained by NGOs due to their inherent capacity to promote social cohesion and create platforms from which excluded and

poverty-stricken groups can participate. The introduction of international aid to help NGOs deal with socio-economic issues, particularly in impoverished communities, conferred status on these organisations as significant drivers of development (Fowler, 2011). Goodhand (2006) criticises NGOs for their lack of political and economic purchase to bring peace. Nonetheless, he claims that NGOs have the comparative advantage, over other peacebuilding actors, of addressing local dimensions of conflict. In the Philippines, the weakness of political parties and trade unions facilitates a public perception of the credibility and legitimacy of NGOs as being in a movement towards social development (Clark, 1998).

Community-based civil-society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs are perceived to be vehicles for agency and legitimacy in peacebuilding operations (Richmond, 2013). They facilitate the expression and articulation of the concerns and needs of the community and encourage people to participate in the development process. The usual challenge in achieving durable and sustainable peace is a lack of inclusiveness in any peace formation, especially when CSOs' representation is excluded in the process (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2009). Most accounts of NGOs in the literature focus on their role as complementary and contradictory agents of development (Banks & Hulme, 2012; Fowler, 2011) and social instruments for democratisation (Silliman & Noble, 1998; Warren, 2011), particularly in communities that have been under an authoritarian regime in the past. Less attention is devoted to looking at NGOs not only as development agents, but also as power players, while they engage in peace operations. This inadequate academic investigation into the engagement of NGOs in the power game creates a puzzle for scholars in the fields of development and security studies. The case of Mindanao is useful in the attempt to understand the baffling functions of NGOs in conflict zones, for three major reasons. First, there is a wide array of international and local peacebuilding NGOs in Mindanao. Second, NGOs are major actors in the internationally supported peace operation in Mindanao, as liberal peace agents contracted by donor agencies. Third, the existence of a hybrid regime, or of multiple power centres that emphasise the dominance of warlord politicians, has an influence on the operation of NGOs in the southern Philippines.

This paper specifically addresses the complex involvement and roles of NGOs in peacebuilding operations in a community with a hybrid political order, in particular Mindanao. A hybrid regime is the result of the confluence and cohabitation of liberal and illiberal power players in war-ridden localities. The security situation in Mindanao is extremely volatile due to an on-going insurgency conflict between the state's security forces and various non-state armed groups (NSAG). Peacebuilding actors, especially NGOs, are facing constant and imminent danger in their peace operations due to lack of security in the conflict zones. It is the contention here that NGOs have learned how to engage in intricate power relations among powerful groups, especially among the local lords in conflict-affected communities in Mindanao.

This paper has two major objectives. First, it analyses the nebulous power arrangements in the Bangsamoro to illustrate the existence of a hybrid political order and to determine the nodes and intensities of power in the conflict zones. Second, it explains the process through which NGOs manage and engage with different power holders, brokers and 'gatekeepers' in conflict-torn communities in Mindanao. It also presents a brief overview of the dangers and perils confronting NGOs in the conflict zones. The paper concludes that although NGOs are liberal peace agents, they are compelled to engage with illiberal powerful players,

particularly warlords and rebel commanders, and to employ alternative approaches to peacebuilding that are beyond the purview of liberalism. The NGOs in Mindanao are generally aware of the intricacy of power relations in the conflict zones, and to some extent they allow local power players to hijack and capture their aid-funded projects. It is important for NGOs to have a harmonious relationship with local political lords, who can afford them protection from violence and give permission to operate in communities marred by armed conflict. This paper seeks to contribute to broader scholarship by adding to an understanding of the process whereby NGOs deal with the liberal and illiberal forces that dominate the arena of power in Mindanao. Therefore, the paper offers a valuable contribution to the debate about humanitarian agencies and their impact on host communities.

A combination of research strategies was used to obtain empirical data and information that capture the multiple perspectives around the involvement of NGOs in peacebuilding in Mindanao. Robust elite interviews were conducted with local, intermediate and international NGO workers, officials of the Philippine Government, leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), university professors and lecturers, officials of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), country directors and programme officers of various donor agencies, and traditional local leaders in Mindanao. Applied ethnography through field observations in conflict-affected localities was employed to come up with a thick description of the socio-political milieu of the conflict communities in Mindanao. A Power Mapping Exercise (PME) using the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) technique was utilised to determine various centres of power, as well as to identify formal and informal actors and the extent of their power and influence, all of which has a significant effect on peacebuilding operations in conflict zones. The fieldwork for this study was conducted from April to August 2016 in conflict-affected communities in the Bangsamoro and key cities in the Philippines.

Discussion for this paper starts with an analysis of the power map, to illustrate and explain the rigidity of the political structure, which is characterised by a hybrid regime in the Bangsamoro. The paper proceeds with a discussion of how NGOs deal with different power players and vulnerable groups in the conflict zones. The last section of the paper discusses some of the challenges and dilemmas facing NGOs in the conflict zones.

NGOs and the terrains of power in the Bangsamoro

The complexities of power structure in the conflict zones of the Bangsamoro can be best understood from a PME. The power map illustrates the multiplicity of power centres in the Bangsamoro by identifying the different power holders, brokers and 'gatekeepers'. It also explains, through a critical assessment of the foundations and sources of their power, why these individuals are considered powerful. It shows how other groups, especially development and peacebuilding NGOs, engage in power relations. In addition, it demonstrates the process through which largely powerless groups, particularly women and children, internally displaced persons, and indigenous people, are excluded and marginalised due to protracted armed conflict and imbalances of power. This state of marginalisation is aggravated by asymmetries of power in the Bangsamoro that favour the interests of powerful and influential groups. Mindanao offers a wide variety and typology of 'the powerful', who have 'power over' other groups. The powerful include local political élites, traditional and religious leaders, insurgent organisations, terrorist groups, warlords,

their status and expand their influence over the conflict-stricken people of Muslim Mindanao.

The power map of war-affected communities (Figure 1) shows the various power holders and players who contribute largely to the dynamics of conflict and of peace operations in Mindanao. A major feature of the political regime in Mindanao is that it emphasises local authoritarianism against a backdrop of the Philippines' national democracy. This is due to the existence of diverging nodes of power, of varying intensity, under the control of powerful groups and individuals. The power map emphasises that substantial power is vested in so-called local *bosses*, strongmen (Sidel, 1999) and overlords (Lara, 2010; Lara & Schoofs, 2013). They are the biggest power players, able to determine politico-security arrangements in the Bangsamoro. A mixture of legal and extra-legal political infrastructures, including government resources and private armies, are at their disposal to help realise their interests and allow them to stay in power. Mercado (2010: 18) claims that these strongmen, especially the warlords, can wield and stay in power because they have “guns, goons and golds,” which are the property of the Philippine Government. Warlords turned local politicians have acquired military-grade weapons and artillery for their campaigns of counter insurgency. Some are even in a position to capture the security forces of the state, such as members of the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the AFP, to help protect their regimes and their lucrative yet illicit activities, which include the narcotics business (Cagoco-Guam & Shoofs, 2013), gun-running syndicates (Lara, 2010) and illegal gambling (Mercado, 2010).

Formal power holders such as local politicians and government bureaucrats are not the only ones exercising power in conflict areas. Insurgent organisations, such as the MILF and the MNLF, occupy another sphere of power, centred in the southern Philippines. Both rebel organisations act as *de facto* governments in their respective territories and strongholds, in different localities in Mindanao. The armed group, MILF, is the biggest rebel organisation with thousands of *mujahidin* fighters. The MILF is in control of military camps all over the Bangsamoro. Most of its major camps are located in the Provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur. Some of the camps, particularly in Maguindanao, are under the command of former MILF commanders who formed part of a splinter group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The MNLF, on the other hand, continues to press its demands for independence from the Philippine Government. Its centre of command is in the island Province of Sulu, where its Chairman, Nur Misuari is residing and giving directives to his loyal sympathisers. Like MILF, the MNLF has established strongholds in the territories it controls, especially in Sulu and Tawi-tawi. Some of the local politicians, such as the Alontos and Semas (see Table 1), are known leaders of the MNLF (FSI & CISAC, 2016). Terrorist organisations and millenarian groups composed of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Al Qaeda (AQ), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Ansuar Al-Khalifah Philippines (AAKP) and the Maute Group (MG) are likewise operating in the Bangsamoro, particularly in Basilan. Their presence threatens the peace initiatives of the government and other development institutions, including NGOs, international organisations and donor agencies.

The political reality in Mindanao is that the dominance of some powerful groups, especially the warlord clans, is primarily due to “erosion of state capacity and legitimacy” (Pugh & Copper, 2004: 9). Local authoritarianism is prevalent in Mindanao, in spite of national democracy in the Philippines. Warlord politics have flourished in Mindanao (and elsewhere in the country) due to the limited ability of the Philippine state to instil democratic values,

particularly around development, governance, human rights and the rule of law. Strongmen can remain in power through the support of national political élites. Some warlords have a *quid pro quo* relationship with the Philippine political élites. Former President Ferdinand E. Marcos is known to have given tremendous favours to the late warlord Mohammad Ali Dimaporo in the 1980s (McCoy, 2009), while former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had a strong alliance with the Ampatuan clan of Maguindanao (Mercado, 2010).

Issues arising from historical injustices and extreme poverty that confront the Moro people serve as social justification for insurgency. The rise of militant rebel organisations with overwhelming numbers of sympathisers is a major indicator of the weak agency and dwindling legitimacy of the Philippine state in some communities in Mindanao. Belligerent groups, especially the MNLF and MILF, have acquired the capacity to challenge the sovereignty of the Philippine state through armed uprising. They have likewise earned the support of the Islamic world, particularly Libya and member states of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). In fact, some high-ranking rebel leaders were sent to Libya and Egypt to acquire a higher education – and for intensive guerrilla training.

To better understand the complex political infrastructure of Mindanao, I present the following groups and individuals, who are involved in the power relations of that area. I will also discuss the implications of such power dynamics for the promotion of democracy and for the peace operations of NGOs in the Bangsamoro.

Lords and their multiple identities

The greatest amount of formal and informal power belongs to the local political élites in the Bangsamoro. In this research, ‘formal power’ refers to authority exercised by actors who are constitutionally elected to hold political posts and those duly appointed to manage administrative positions in national and local government bureaucracies in the Philippines. ‘Informal power’, on the other hand, is understood as the agency of actors to impose authority or exercise control over others by invoking their cultural, religious and traditional claims as customary rulers. Commanders of different armed groups are deemed to hold informal power. The employment of fear and terror by the warlords of Mindanao is another form of informal power. Political power in the region is monopolised by a few privileged Moro families. Each political clan has a bailiwick in its respective province or municipality. It has been a political reality in Muslim Mindanao that all members of a single nuclear family occupy electoral posts and that these family members simply rotate through electoral positions. For example, when the patriarch of the clan is no longer eligible to bid for re-election as provincial governor because he can have only a limited term in office, his wife or any of his children may run to replace him in his post and eventually vie for another electoral position, such as town mayor or member of the House of the Representatives. Polygamy is accepted in Islam and most local Muslim politicians in Mindanao have more than one wife: three wives of the late Basilan Congressman, Wahab Akbar, were elected to public office in the May 2016 National Election. Akbar was killed in an explosion at the *Batasang Pambansa* (Philippine National Assembly) in 2008 (Bartolome, 2016). Moreover, members of these political clans are not only placed in various political posts, they also occupy key positions in the local and national bureaucracies of the Philippine Government. Hence, politics in the Bangsamoro is characterised by the monopoly and hegemony of local political élites, who

are successful in wielding almost absolute power and control in their respective territories. However, it is the contention here that the Philippine National Government remains the most powerful institution. It can employ the power of its military and police to neutralise rebellion and terrorist activities in Mindanao and to incarcerate political warlords who commit offenses against the law. The arrest and detention of some influential members of the Ampatuan clan as alleged perpetrators of the Maguindanao Massacre is an indication that the Philippine state has the power to impose the rule of law in the Bangsamoro when needed. The overwhelming amount of power enjoyed by local political élites is primarily due to weak regulatory oversight from central government, leading to chaos and anarchy in Mindanao.

Table 1. List of politically prominent families in Maguindanao Province

Clans	Landlord	Business elite	Warlord	Currently holding political post	Royal Family (Datu or Sultan)	Affiliation with MILF/MNLF	With Private Armed Groups
Ampatuan	X	X	X	X	x		X
Sinsuat	X	X	x	X	X		X
Mangudadatu	X	X	x	X	x		X
Sema	X	X	x	X		X	X
Midtimbang	x	x		X	X		
Sangki	x		x	X			x
Matalam	X		x	X	X		X
Pendatun	x	X		X			
Mastura	x			X	X	X	x
Datumanong	x		x				X
Paglas	x	x		X			
Piang	x			X			
Tomawis-Aratuc	X			X	X		
Dilangalen	x	X	x			X	x
Biruar	x	x	x	x	x		X

(Source: This list of political families in Maguindanao is culled from multiple sources, such as data from the Official Gazette of the Philippines and the League of Mayors in the Philippines. Their identity as landlords, warlords, customary leaders, etc. is based on the scholarship of Mercado (2010), and McCoy (2009) and validated by academic and military participants in the study, using the Rapid Rural Appraisal approach.)

Note: The larger the size of the 'x', the higher the intensity

Politics in the Bangsamoro are in the hands of a few prominent and powerful political clans. As shown in Table 1, the power of political lords in the Bangsamoro emanates from economic, political, military and cultural status. Apparently, influential Moro politicians not only hold elected posts in the government; they also belong to affluent families with vast land holdings and are owners of various business establishments. Most of these landed politicians are engaged in lucrative agricultural ventures, such as palm oil and banana production. Some of these wealthy politicians are the exclusive distributors of the commercial products of big private companies, such as Cola-Cola and San Miguel Beer. They also employ thousands of workers in the Bangsamoro, who are expected to deliver votes for their patrons during elections, due to a strong culture of clientelism in the Philippines.² Some of these politicians are invoking their customary rights as traditional leaders, which they inherited from their forefathers. As warlords they have military power, manifested through their control of their private armies and their capacity to purchase expensive high-powered firearms and ammunition from abroad. According to a confidential source from the

² For a more elaborate discussion about patron-client paradigm in the Philippines, see the scholarship of Carl H. Lande (1966) on Leaders, Factions and Parties: The Structure of Philippine Politics.

Philippine military, a private militia may consist of from 5 to 50 people who receive salaries from warlord politicians. Interestingly, some less powerful politicians at village level are conscripted into the private armies of the warlords. Dizard, Walker and Tucker reported that there are 107 private armies in the entire Philippines. In the ARMM, politicians have used private armies to organise electoral violence (2012: 539). In addition, some politicians have close connections with the MILF and MNLF, which can provide them with military protection.

Among the three biggest political clans the Ampatuans have earned most fame and popularity in the entire Philippines, for two major reasons. First, they were in control of almost every area and aspect of the politics of Maguindanao and the ARMM. They were able to wield a tremendous amount of political power due to their strong connection with former President Arroyo, who benefitted from block votes from Maguindanao in the 2004 Presidential election (see Mercado, 2010). President Arroyo was even perceived as an adopted daughter of the patriarch, Datu Andal Ampatuan Sr. With the staunch support of the Philippine president, Andal Sr. served as undefeated governor of Maguindanao from 1998-2009 (see Gavilan, 2015). His son Zaldy was elected as ARMM governor in 2005 and remained in that position until his arrest and detention in 2009. Other sons of the patriarch were also elected mayors in their respective towns in Maguindanao. Interestingly, some of the towns in the Province, such as the Municipalities of Datu Saudi, Datu Hoffer and Datu Unsay, are named after the sons of Andal Sr. At the height of their power as the “overlords of the ARMM” (Lara, 2010: 81), they were able to sway the ARMM Regional Assembly to pass local laws subdividing the old town of Maganoy into four new municipalities: the towns of Shariff Aguak, Unsay, Mamasapano and Hoffer (Mercado, 2010). Such an initiative of the Ampatuan clan to alter the political subdivision of the ARMM was motivated by their family’s interest in creating a bailiwick for each son of Andal Sr. Second, the Ampatuans are accused and implicated as primary perpetrators and instigators of the horrendous Maguindanao Massacre³, in which some members of the Mangudadatu family and thirty-two journalists were slaughtered in the town of Kauran, Maguindanao, on 23 November 2009. Key members of the family, in particular former ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan and Datu Unsay Mayor, Andal Ampatuan Jr, are currently incarcerated. Their father Andal Sr. died on 17 July 2015, while the trial for the case was ongoing.⁴ At the time of writing, the Mangudadatu family had gained control of local politics in Maguindanao after the infamous massacre.

The list of prominent political clans in the Bangsamoro provides empirical evidence of warlord politics and local state capture in the southern Philippines. It is obvious that the local politicians are not just in control of government infrastructure, especially the use of the internal revenue allotment (IRA)⁵. Interestingly, strongmen in Mindanao are not only warlord political leaders and landed elites. Some are also recognised as customary rulers such as *datu* or *sultan* by right and by blood in their traditional domain or fiefdom. Royal families, such as the Mastura (McCoy, 2009), Sinsuat, Matalam, Midtimbang, and Tomawis-Aratuc, have customary claims to the Sultanate of Maguindanao as descendants of Sultan

³ For more information about the involvement of the Ampatuan clan in the Maguindanao Massacre, visit <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/75689-infographic-5-years-after-maguindanao-massacre>

⁴ For more information about the death of the Andal Ampatuan Sr, visit <http://www.rappler.com/nation/99713-maguindanao-massacre-suspect-andal-ampatuan-sr-dead>

⁵ The IRA is the annual budget allocation provided by the Philippine National Government to all subnational government units, including the ARMM.

Kudarat. *Datuism*, based on *agama* and customary law, is widely practiced in Mindanao even today (see Mercado, 2010).

A distinguishing feature of “warlordism” according to Reno (1999) is the employment of violent force to eliminate or neutralise opponents and to exclusively accumulate wealth by illicit means. Kreuzer (2005) asserts that the local political landscape of Mindanao, even before the advent of Moro insurgency, was characterised by political violence from warring clans. *Rido* or clan war is the usual driver of horizontal conflict in Mindanao (see Torres, 2007). Actors like the warlords of Mindanao may aggravate internal conflicts because of their ability to accumulate weapons and other resources through the use of their transnational trading networks (see Pugh & Cooper, 2004). The situation in Mindanao demonstrates that warlord-politician hybrids own private armed groups (PAGs). These paramilitaries include the Civilian Volunteer Officers (CVO) and Civilian Auxiliary Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU). The members of the paramilitary units can be seen in Mindanao wearing the uniform of the state security forces. The control and possession of private armies by local lords has been permitted by the Philippine state to some degree in order to counter Moro rebels and curtail communist insurgency. However, these private armies are sometimes used to eliminate political enemies (Mercado, 2010). For example, the Maguindanao Massacre was carried out by the PAGs of the Ampatuans against their rival, the Mangudadatus (Santos, 2014). Moreover, the ownership of private armies seems to be a non-negotiable security investment among local politicians to ensure their safety and the survival of their regime.

The warlord families, according to Lara (2010:79), have “corrosive power” that is detrimental to the promotion of democracy and the attainment of peace in Mindanao. Lara claimed that warlords in Mindanao have stockpiles of arms and ammunition and therefore, have undisputed ability to wage violence against rebels or against their political enemies. Lara is likewise bold in exposing the involvement of these violent clans in the lucrative business around illegal weapons and drugs in Southeast Asia, which is according to him, “a new source of politico-economic power that explains the resilience of warlord clans” (2010: 79). He added that these clans have gained access to development aid and assistance for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of war-torn communities in Mindanao. Foreign aid has become a significant element of war economy in Mindanao that is sometimes captured or hijacked by local lords.⁶

Lastly, Table 1 shows that some of the prominent political élites have affiliations with the rebel organisations. When the Philippine Government signed the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) with the MNLF, some of its leaders vied for and won electoral positions. For example, the MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari became the Regional Governor of the ARMM from 1996 to 2001 (see FSI & CISAC, 2016). At present, the Semas and Alontos, key leaders of the MNLF, are occupying elected posts in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao and Cotabato City. The affiliation of politicians to rebel organisations is evident in the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi (BASULTA), which are bailiwicks of the MNLF. However, direct affiliation of local political elites with the MILF cannot be established. Some local political lords such as the Ampatuans have a hostile relationship with the MILF. The Vice-chairman of

⁶ Interview with Prof. Rufa Cagoco-Guiam, Director of Institute for Peace and Development, Mindanao State University, General Santos City on 22 August 2016.

the MILF, Ghazali Jaafar, blames local politicians for ineffective and unresponsive government in the region and the extreme impoverishment of the Moro people.⁷ As a revolutionary organisation, MILF does not recognise the legitimacy of local politicians and MILF sympathisers do not participate in any democratic exercise, especially elections.

Insurgents and millenarian group

The insurgent groups, MNLF and MILF have established communities in different localities in the southern Philippines. Both rebel organisations have military camps, not only in the mainland provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del sur, but also in the island provinces of BASULTA. In their stronghold communities, both rebel groups created a parallel system of governance using their civilian government structure. People in these communities are very loyal and obey the *de facto* governments established by these rebel fronts. The loyalty of the people of the Bangsamoro towards the rebel organisations is rooted on their desire for self-determination and recognition of the Moro nation within the Philippine state.

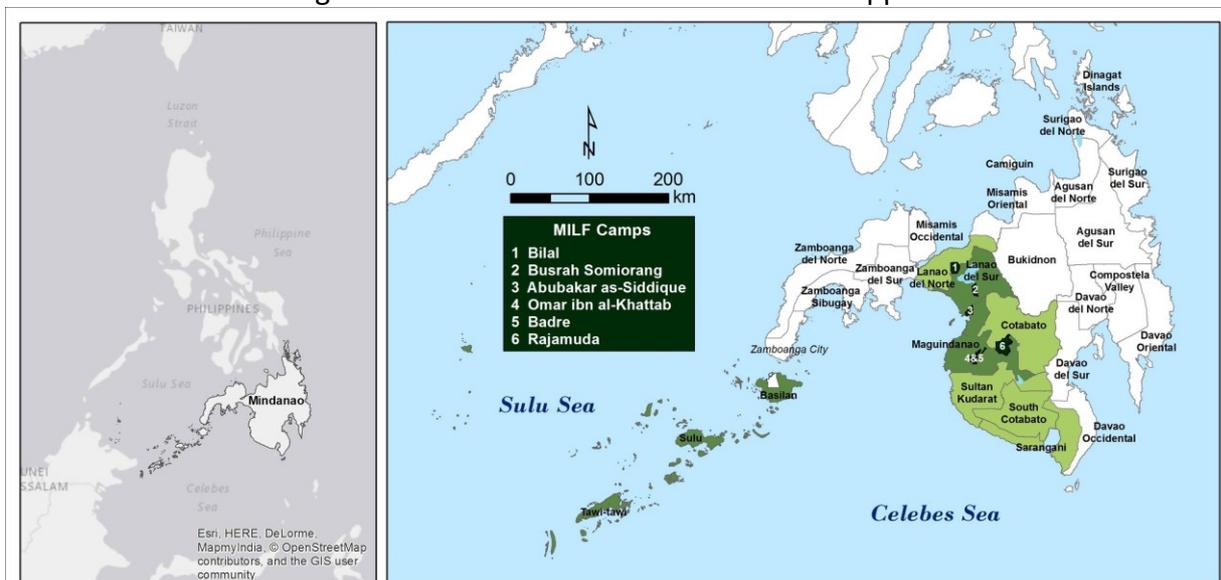


Figure 2: Map showing the locations of the six major MILF camps (Source: Bangsamoro Development Authority and Armed Forces of the Philippines)

Note: This map, which is original to this study, was generated using Arc GIS software. The list of major MILF camps was provided by the BDA, while the information on the locations of these camps is from a confidential informant inside the AFP.

As shown in the map (Figure 2), the MILF has six major camps across the Bangsamoro. They are not mere training camps in which members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) are stationed, but communities of loyal supporters and sympathisers of the MILF. Camp Abubakar as-Siddique, located in the Matanog, Maguindanao, used to be the biggest MILF stronghold but it was destroyed during the “all-out war” against the movement declared by former President Joseph Estrada on 21 March 2000 (see Melican, 2015). The largest camp of the MILF in Lanao del Sur is Busrah Somiorang in the Town of Butig. The Municipality of Talayan in Maguindanao hosts two major MILF camps. It is interesting to note that Camp Badre is located inside the perimeter zone of Camp Omar ibn al-Khattab. Some camps are situated on the boundary of two provinces. Camp Bilal in the town of Munai

⁷ Interview on 24 July 2016, Pigkalagan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, Philippines

has an area that overlaps Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur, while Camp Rajamuda in Pikit, North Cotabato, extends in breadth up to Maguindanao.⁸ In addition to these six major camps, the MILF has twenty-five satellite camps all over Mindanao, including its headquarters and centre of government, Camp Darapanan in Maguindanao.⁹ In these localities the MILF is perceived as the official government, with authority to implement law and order, executed through its ground commanders.

An absentee government and poor delivery of basic social services by mandated agencies of the Philippine state are evident in the Bangsamoro. Most local chief executives, particularly mayors, are not visible in their respective towns. They usually reside in nearby Christian communities in the cities of Koronadal, Tacurong and Davao. These politicians usually live in much safer communities because of permanent danger in their own towns.¹⁰ If they were to live in their own localities, they would be faced with the constant threat of being killed or ambushed by lawless groups or their political opponents.

Government bureaucracies are essentially dysfunctional in most places in the Bangsamoro. For instance, newly constructed municipal halls in the Province of Maguindanao are like white elephants because most employees who work in the local government units (LGU) are nowhere to be found, even during office hours. This depressing reality in most LGUs in the Bangsamoro is detrimental to the welfare of ordinary citizens. Poor people are unable to receive social services that are supposed to be provided by local government. They also encounter difficulties in obtaining public documents, such as birth certificates, because the people in charge are usually absent from the municipal hall. This scenario of dysfunctional governance seems to extend across the Bangsamoro.¹¹

The absence of effective government and the dysfunctional service-delivery institutions in the Bangsamoro provide favourable conditions for rebel organisations to earn the support and loyalty of ordinary people, especially those from the grassroots. The presence and governance system of the rebel groups makes a greater impression on people than does that of official state institutions. For instance, the Moro people in Maguindanao follow the directives and orders of the Central Committee of the MILF, which are disseminated through local commanders assigned to each community. During this research, I discovered the reason some people in Maguindanao do not use aid, especially medicines provided by the NGOs and donor organisations, is that medicines and palm oil that are given to conflict-stricken communities are being thrown away, or converted into cash by being sold in the local market. The recipients of aid goods are suspicious of the content of these medicines and cooking oils. Some believe that they are contaminated with pork and mind-altering substances.

⁸ The locations of the six major MILF camps are based on confidential interviews, 2 July 2016, General Santos City, Philippines

⁹ Interview with Ms. Marifah Agar, BDA, 19 August 2016, General Santos City, Philippines

¹⁰ Interview on 7 August 2016 in General Santos City. Dr. Mario Aguja is a Sociology Professor at the Mindanao State University, General Santos City and a member of the IDB, a structure that is tasked to facilitate the decommissioning of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), the military component of the MILF.

¹¹ The author personally witnessed absentee government in the Bangsamoro in his capacity as a university lecturer and development worker who conducted research projects in the Bangsamoro.

The recipients' negative perception of aid commodities is probably due to lack of social preparation and public education from NGOs and aid agencies concerning their intervention in war-ravaged communities. However, according to a Moro leader who is deeply involved in peacebuilding in Mindanao and who has worked closely with the MILF, people are instructed by local commanders not to utilise aid commodities, especially medicines and cooking oils, because these are *haram*, or forbidden, in Islam.¹² This finding was also confirmed by two public school teachers in Maguindanao, who are involved in the distribution of relief goods in their respective municipalities.¹³ This scenario serves to show the extent of the MILF's power and influence over communities in which they have established a presence.

Marginal communities and poor people

The power map does not show only powerful groups in the war-ravaged communities of Mindanao. It also includes groups that have been marginalised and made subordinate by protracted armed conflict and dysfunctional governance in the Bangsamoro. The Moro people have not only accepted war as part of their day-to-day reality but they are also suffering from extreme poverty. The average incidence of poverty in the ARMM is 52.54%, which is considerably higher than the national poverty rate of 24.9% (NSCB, 2012). Four ARMM provinces are in the bottom ten among all provinces with lowest Human Development Index (HDI) based on the 2013 UNDP Report. Economic development appears slow in areas marred by violent conflict. Business-men are reluctant to pour investments into these insecure and volatile parts of Mindanao, so the people in the Bangsamoro have limited opportunity to engage in productive employment, because there are very few business establishments. The Moro people rely on subsistence farming and fishing as their primary sources of income. However, they cannot engage in long-term and permanent productive activities due to intermittent outbreaks of war (see Cagoco-Guiam, 2013). For example, the Joint Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (JCCCH) reported a total of 333 armed skirmishes between the security forces of the Philippine Government and the MILF during 2008 and 2009, during the fiasco that was the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD)¹⁴, which meant that armed encounters in the Bangsamoro were taking place almost once a day. The JCCCH estimated that around 600,000 civilians were displaced due to the series of armed confrontations following the collapse of the peace negotiation between the government and the MILF in 2008.¹⁵ Dizard, Walker and Tucker (2012: 543) reported that skirmishes following the collapse of the MOA-AD resulted in the death of 400 people and the displacement of 700,000 civilians. Around 60,000 of them

¹² Confidential interview with a Moro leader and NGO worker.

¹³ Confidential interviews with two public school teachers in the Province of Maguindanao.

¹⁴ Eight among fifteen justices of the Supreme Court of the Philippines voted against the constitutionality of the MOA-AD on 14 October 2008. Such a ruling of the Supreme Court signalled the collapse of the peace negotiations between the Government of the Philippines and the MILF. For more information on the MOA visit the website of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, a German NGO that is actively involved in the Mindanao peace process, at http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_15591-1522-2-30.pdf?090130094159.

¹⁵ This report was presented at the Titayan: Bridging for Peace Workshop of the Al-Qalam Institute of Ateneo de Davao University, Davao City on 21 April 2016. For more information about the report of the JCCCH visit the official website of Ateneo de Davao University at <http://www.addu.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CCCH.presentation.pdf>

remain displaced. The most vulnerable to displacement and violence are poor and marginal groups, especially women and children, and indigenous people.¹⁶

NGOs' engagement with the "powerful"

NGOs in Mindanao have learned skills that allow them to manoeuvre within the intricate power relations that are part of conflict-affected communities in Mindanao. These skills are products of long years of experience of working for peace in the war zone. Most financially stable NGOs hire local consultants, who have networks with *bosses* and rebel commanders. It is imperative that NGOs map the nodes and intensities of powers controlled by different players and brokers in the conflict zones. By understanding power, NGOs may devise mechanisms to engage these actors and solicit their involvement in the implementation of development projects. The following are approaches employed by NGOs in dealing with the complexities of power in Mindanao.

First, NGOs are taking advantage of invited spaces in local governance by participating in different special bodies and development councils of LGUs. The law, particularly the 1991 Local Government Code of the Philippines, provides these spaces for NGOs' participation. Second, they are investing in building relationships with local lords instead of challenging their rule. Having a friendly regime in conflict-affected communities is very important for NGOs to be able to safely enter and implement projects in the territories of local lords. NGOs even tolerate the hijacking of their projects as long as they are allowed to continue with their peace operations in the territories of the local lords. Third, some NGOs are able to find political champions to help penetrate the rigid political structure that is dominated by the local lords. These champions are local leaders and members of influential clans, who are open-minded and appreciative of collaborative engagements between the LGU and NGOs. Religious leaders and customary chiefs are potential champions, especially at the grassroots, who can be selected by NGOs in their peace operations. Traditional rulers are perceived to be more effective in facilitating dialogue when resolving family disputes.¹⁷ Fourth, NGOs are focusing on humanitarian assistance rather than on promoting good governance, in order not to antagonise and threaten the reign of local lords. A lack of capacity on the part of NGOs to perform their watchdog function is another reason for their weakness in promoting good governance. Lastly, in MILF-controlled communities, NGOs collaborate with the development arm of the rebel organisations, the Bangsamoro Development Authority (BDA). They work with ground commanders of the rebel front and have security clearance from the Central Committee of the MILF in Camp Darapanan.

Dilemmas in the conflict zones

Mindanao's volatile situation regarding peace and stability poses major challenges in the peacebuilding operations of development NGOs. It is imperative for them to take into consideration the many factors and circumstances that may affect their operations and presence in conflict zones. Being caught in the crossfire between the AFP and various

¹⁶ Interview with Datu Roldan Babelon, Tribal Chieftain of Arumanen-Manobo on 24 April 2016 in Davao City, Philippines

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. Wifredo Magno Torres, The Asia Foundation, on 9 August 2016 in Taguig City, Philippines

guerrilla groups, which would certainly compromise the safety of their personnel, is not the only possibility that development NGOs have to take into account. Some NGOs, especially those with many years' experience of dealing with conflict and emergency situations in Mindanao, have learned how to avoid actual combats among warring groups. They have an idea as to where and when a skirmish might be going to take place.

Aside from information coming from the military, some NGOs have direct and indirect access to rebel commanders on the ground and to community leaders, who feed them information about potential outbreaks of atrocities. In some instances, connections with rebel commanders are established through people working in the government, especially teachers and health workers, who are often relatives of the commanders. For example, a midwife in one town, whose husband is a commander in the MILF, usually gives information about the security situation in her locality to the Municipal Health Office as well as to its partner NGOs.¹⁸ In addition, particularly in the province of Maguindanao, public school teachers are reliable sources of information about the security status of the community. They are usually informed by their students about any possible outbreak of hostilities in their community. Apparently, students are aware whenever there is mobilisation on the part of the guerrilla forces.¹⁹ With this information, NGOs can determine the most appropriate time to enter communities that are likely to experience armed encounters.

The constant security threat faced by NGO development workers is detrimental to communities that rely on their services. This is particularly true in the Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) in the Bangsamoro, which are hubs of poverty and have minimal access to government services. Development organisations, especially IOs and NGOs, would certainly suspend their operations in the GIDA when the safety of their personnel is not guaranteed.²⁰ Such a security protocol is vital for the protection of NGO staff. Nevertheless, the suspension of NGO projects and relief initiatives harms people in the GIDA. Any delay in the delivery of alternative services to isolated and impoverished communities aggravates their existing state of marginalisation and exclusion. Hence, security is a crucial pre-condition for peace workers, including NGOs, to be able to operate and execute their peace and development functions completely, particularly in the GIDA. Being unable to ensure continuous operation also affects the nature of the programmes that can be implemented by NGOs. In fact, there have been instances when NGOs were forced to abandon their operations or the implementation of projects due to the sudden outbreak of war in the Bangsamoro.

Conclusion

In peacebuilding operations, NGOs have taken into account the existence of complex power dynamics in conflict-affected communities in Mindanao. The coalescing nature of formal and informal powers, and the presence of multiple power nodes and centres in the Bangsamoro have contributed hugely to the complexity of the peace operations of various development workers. The power structure in Mindanao's war-riddled communities shows a

¹⁸ Confidential interview with two Municipal Health Officers of Maguindanao Province

¹⁹ Confidential interview with two anonymous public school teachers in the Province of Maguindanao

²⁰ Interview with Dr. Ronald Galaez, Municipal Health Officer of Mother Kabuntalan, Maguindanao, 24 July 2016, General Santos City, Philippines

preponderance of authoritarian power in warlord clans, whose power and influence emanate from political, military, traditional, and even illegal sources. Although there is an obvious concentration of power in the hands of warlord politicians, it is worth noting that the Philippine Government remains the most powerful institution in Mindanao. It can use the might of its military and police forces to counteract and incarcerate erring warlords such as the Ampatuans, who brought about the Maguindanao massacre. In some localities, leaders of war-like organisations are acting as *de facto* rulers of their loyal sympathisers and supporters. In addition, the asymmetries of power in the Bangsamoro highlight the existence of zones of marginalisation and exclusion of powerless groups comprising IDPs and indigenous people, as well as women and children.

Dealing with warlord politicians and rebel commanders on the ground has become a non-negotiable requirement if NGOs are to safely operate in conflict zones. This type of relationship with strongmen or bosses in conflict communities entails a number of detrimental consequences and risks. There are reports that NGO projects, funded by foreign aid, have been hijacked and captured by powerful individuals in conflict-ridden communities. Some NGOs have been co-opted by local politicians to serve the politicians' interests at the expense of conflict-stricken and powerless groups that are grappling with extreme poverty and marginalisation. Nonetheless, through a good understanding of the terrains of power in the Bangsamoro, NGOs have learned various mechanisms by which they can engage and deal with the local lords, without compromising their safety. The participation of NGOs in special local bodies and development councils, and their ability to find political champions among local *bosses* willing to support their peace agenda and development interventions, are some notable examples of these mechanisms.

A major controversial claim arising from this study is that NGOs, although agents of liberalism, are reinforcing illiberal norms and values, particularly those of patronage and clientelism. As traditional rulers, local *bosses* tend to maintain support in their patron-client relations by distributing largesse to their clients, especially the poor and war-stricken people of the Bangsamoro. This study reveals that some NGOs in Mindanao deliberately undermine the existence of patron-client ties in distributing their resources. This means that they allow the local *bosses* to influence their operations concerning how, where and to who projects should be directed. In most instances the local *bosses* or strongmen manage to take the credit for the NGO's initiatives and efforts in the conflict zones. These local power players tend to claim ownership over NGOs and other aid-funded projects. It is relatively easy for the strongmen to capture NGO projects, because ordinary people at the grassroots are not really aware of the identities of the NGOs and their donors. In most cases, local politicians embrace NGO projects as their own accomplishment with the justification that the NGOs can only deliver services in their localities because they let them, or that it was their initiative to bring the NGOs to their towns. This finding was documented when the World Bank conducted a spot check of ARMM Social Fund (ASF) Projects in 2013.²¹ A good number of respondents said that the various projects under the ASF were from their local politicians. This paper claims that NGOs have good intentions about helping impoverished people in conflict-ridden communities, but that they are unable to alter the rigid political and social arrangements of the Bangsamoro. Consequently, they tactically reinforce the patron-client boss-led social structures in the conflict zones.

²¹ The author was involved in this study as a data analyst.

A glaring weakness of NGOs in Mindanao is their inability to execute a function that is important in civil society; that is, to challenge the rule of local political leaders and demand responsive, transparent, accountable governance. To compensate for this weakness, NGOs focus rather on their role as alternative channels for social services that can help the reconstruction and rehabilitation of communities devastated by decades of armed conflict. They are agents of socio-economic development, commissioned by donor agencies to implement aid-funded projects in Mindanao. It appears that NGOs in Mindanao tend to concentrate their energies and resources on relief operations that are immensely important in affording basic protection to communities in complex emergency situations, especially war. NGOs in Mindanao are not exempt from flaws and imperfections. Some are criticised for their dubious intentions and corrupt practices. Because of the corrupt practices of some NGOs, NGOs working for peace are unable to address Mindanao's lack of a democratic system. Nevertheless, NGOs are seen as being very valuable socially as alternative service providers required because of dysfunctional governance and the abject poverty found in Mindanao's conflict zones.

Finally, lack of security and instability make peace operations difficult in Mindanao. NGOs and other development organisations cannot engage in peace operations, particularly in remote and isolated areas, when there is an outbreak of atrocities. The continuation of violent armed confrontations between the state's security forces and various NSAGs aggravates the marginalisation and exclusion of already disenfranchised groups. NGOs tend to suspend the delivery of social services to marginalised communities when there is armed tension among warring parties. Hence, there is an urgent need for the cessation of hostilities in the Bangsamoro. Combined efforts towards social development through the intervention of NGOs, donor agencies, international humanitarian organisations and the government can only be optimised to generate sustainable outcomes for peace when there is stability and security in the southern Philippines.

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