Domesticating by commodifying the liberal peace? Evidence from the southern Philippines

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Abstract

Liberal peacebuilding is the prominent and popular framework employed by intergovernmental organisations and many international non-government organisations in conflict management and resolution in conflictual societies globally. This peacebuilding framework is based on the liberal peace theory, which advances the idea that liberally constituted states are more peaceful in comparison to their illiberal counterparts. With the significant decline of interstate conflicts in the post-Cold War era, IGOs and NGOs shifted their focus and attention to intrastate conflicts in the developing world using the same liberal peacebuilding framework. This paper seeks to explain the process whereby IGOs and NGOs transport, and therefore domesticate, the liberal peace in the context of intrastate conflict in Mindanao—a war-torn region in the southern Philippines. The primary argument of this paper is that the commodification of peace is a strategic mechanism of IGOs and donor agencies to incentivise NGOs in transporting the liberal peace in Mindanao, which has been riven by decades of insurgency conflict and violence. The arguments presented in this paper are drawn from in-depth interviews and ethnographic field observations in conflict-affected communities in the southern Philippines. This paper offers two major contributions. First, it seeks to advance the scholarly understanding of the nexus between liberal democratic peacebuilding and the politics of aid in the context of intrastate conflict. Second, it presents the different ontological and empirical referents of the domestic variants of the liberal peace theory, which are embedded in the activities of NGOs in Mindanao.

Keywords: liberal peace, peacebuilding, Mindanao, foreign aid, NGO

Introduction

The dramatic decline in the number of interstate wars in the post-Cold War era (Human Security Research Group, 2013; Newman, Paris and Richmond, 2009) is attributed to the success of many internationally supported peacemaking, peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts in different conflict-devastated communities that are apparently associated with liberal peacebuilding (Richmond, 2007). Contemporary peacebuilding operations that are supported by external actors are primarily concerned with building democratic and market-oriented institutions in conflictual societies. Liberal peacebuilding emerges as a hegemonic yet appealing prescriptive model for peace in war-torn polities. The democratisation and integration into the global market economy of conflict-stricken communities in the developing world are the ultimate goals in liberal peacebuilding (Hemmer, 2008; Paris, 1997). Moreover, this peacebuilding model is the "software that drives the hardware" of various international actors, which claim to have peacebuilding mandates (Mac Ginty, 2010: 396).

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Traditionally, the ideational value of liberal peacebuilding, which is based in the liberal peace theory, lies in its claim to conclude and prevent interstate wars among states (Doyle, 1983; Newman et al., 2009). It has become the "globally dominant concept of justice in the age of peacebuilding" (Philpott, 2012: 70). However, the end of the Cold War period saw the rise of domestic armed conflicts in many post-colonial states. Intergovernmental organisations (IGO), particularly the United Nations (UN), are the prominent and aggressive actors in promoting the liberal peace (Philpott, 2012), even in situations of intrastate conflicts (see Cavalcante, 2014). A glaring proof that the UN is the most influential espouser of the liberal peace is the *Agenda for Peace* manifesto authored by its former secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992. This document is obviously laced with liberal prescriptions and democratic cosmopolitan values and approaches towards achieving peace in societies marred by atrocities and mass violence (Philpott, 2012). To preserve the ideological and epistemological relevance of the liberal peace, its promoters seem to export western-style values and norms that undergird the peacebuilding activities of various actors in communities with a strong legacy of intrastate conflicts.

In the subnational conflict community Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, IGOs and NGOs involved in the peace operation are the key drivers in domesticating the liberal peace. In this paper, I argue that IGOs and multilateral and bilateral donor agencies turn peace into a commodity to provide material rewards to actors, especially NGOs, which are key promoters of liberal peacebuilding. The commodification of the liberal peace is a strategic tool of IGOs and donors to incentivise NGOs in transporting this northern epistemology of peace (Richmond, 2011) to the southern Philippines. The arguments I present in this paper are based on rich ethnographic sources. I conducted robust interviews among experts from local and international NGOs, the Philippine Government, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), academic institutions, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and donor agencies. Names and organisations of the research respondents are anonymised in the paper due to security reasons and ethical considerations. Field observations in war-prone communities in Mindanao were also done to enrich the quality of information used in this research.

Mindanao is an interesting case to further understand the phenomenon of commodifying and privatising the liberal peace. It is home to the world's longest-running insurgencies and intrastate conflicts (Morales, 2003; Whaley, 2014). It can also be considered as an internationalised intrastate conflict because of the overwhelming presence of foreign states, donors and IGOs in the peace process since the onset of rebellion in the 1970s until today. The constant flow of foreign aid from external sources is demonstrative of the willingness and motivation of the international community to finance the expensive peace operation in the southern Philippines (see Adriano and Parks, 2013). Moreover, Mindanao hosts a wide array of local and international NGOs (see Africa, 2013), contracted by donors to perform a variety of peacebuilding functions in a considerably privatised peace operation (Espesor, 2017).

This paper offers two major contributions. First, it seeks to advance the scholarly understanding of the linkages between liberal democratic peacebuilding and the political economy of foreign development assistance in situations of domestic armed conflict. Second, it aims to identify different ontological and empirical referents of the domestic variants of the liberal peace theory, which are lacking in the literature (see Hegre and Sambanis, 2006). I argue that these referents are regularly embedded in peacebuilding activities of NGOs in Mindanao, and I do not intend to evaluate their impacts in this paper.

The article starts with a brief discussion about liberal peacebuilding and the liberal peace theory. The paper proceeds with an explanation of the process of the commodification of the liberal peace and its material incentives for NGOs that help in domesticating this western model of

peacebuilding Lastly, this paper presents the complex functions of NGOs, which may serve as indicators and referents of the domestic version of the liberal peace.

Liberal peacebuilding

Peacebuilding activities in volatile and conflict-prone societies have broad components and goals. Apparently, peacebuilding actors, particularly IGOs and NGOs, devote more attention in building institutions that facilitate democracy promotion and marketisation of conflict-stricken communities. For this reason, the nature of peacebuilding in contemporary times is labelled as "liberal peacebuilding" (Newman et al., 2009: 11). It derives its theoretical foundation from the liberal peace theory, which claims that liberal states tend to be more peaceful in conducting their internal and international affairs compared to states that are illiberal or under autocratic rule (Owen, 1994; Pugh, 2004). The international version of the liberal peace is the democracy peace theory postulated by Michael Doyle (1983, 1986, 2005). He claims that states with consolidated democracies have a constant inclination towards peace and do not wage war against one another. Political differences and ensuing conflicts among them are typically resolved in a non-violent manner, such as diplomacy. Citizens in democratic societies are also unwilling to support costly wars that are disruptive to global commercial and economic activities. Both theories persistently assert that democratisation and marketisation will likely generate peace in war-prone polities (Newman et al., 2009; Zürcher, Manning, Evenson, Hayman, Riese and Roehner, 2013).

These theories are conventionally applied by scholars to understand the complex linkages between democracy, war and peace in the context of interstate conflicts. The death of the Soviet Union, which signalled the end of the Cold War, affirms the prominence of liberal democracy and capitalism as the most successful political and economic ideologies. This triumphant status accorded to liberal ideology is apparently inspired by the "end of history" thesis of Francis Fukuyama (1992). Consequently, communist states, particularly former satellites of the Soviet Union, gradually transformed into democracies, although with varying degree of success (see Dauderstädt and Gerrits, 2000). The fall of communism in Europe apparently reinforced the ideological appeal of liberal norms, which cascaded globally. Nonetheless, western-style democracy in the post-Cold War era was confronted with myriad challenges, including the surge of intrastate and ethnic conflicts, particularly in the global south (Ratuva, 2016).

Post-colonial states, particularly in Asia and Africa, have become the breeding ground of civil wars and internal mass violence. According to Carey (2012), states which are fledgling democracies are prone to collapse and state failure as they do not have substantial preparation for independence and have been under corrupt regimes for decades. Groups that have experienced subordination and oppression have the tendency to rebel and engage in armed uprisings against the state (Kinsella and Rousseau, 2009). Some of the notable examples of groups that have rebelled against the state due to perceived injustice and deprivation are the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) or Free Aceh Movement in Sumatra, Indonesia and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and MILF in the southern Philippines. The emergence of domestic armed conflicts in failed or fragile states has become the primary focus of the international peacebuilding agenda (Paris, 1997). Moreover, liberal actors see the rise of extremist and radical organisations in these regions of the world as a transnational security imperative (Carey, 2012; Newman, 2011). Fukuyama (2004) asserts that the security thinking of powerful western states is driven by their assumptions that weak states are the sources of threats to international security and not their rival big powers. Hence, conflict-prone communities are in a way demonised as they pose a grave threat to global security and stability. This is a compelling argument that drives powerful states and IGOs in securitising peacebuilding to ensure stability and contain conflict in the global south (Newman, 2011; Newman et al., 2009).

With the pressing global security threats coming from conflict-infested communities in many post-colonial states, various international peacebuilding players have promoted the utility of the liberal peace in managing and resolving intrastate conflicts. Newman (2011) claims that liberal institutionalist models typically guide peacebuilding operations in post-war environments. Multilateral and bilateral agencies and IGOs are the key drivers in domesticating international peacebuilding frameworks that are formulated based on liberal principles. These principles particularly emphasise security, development, good governance and respect for human rights. Cosmopolitan actors, who are driving peacebuilding operations in the global south, have the considerably naïve assumption that democratisation and integration into global market economy are truly necessary to generate long-lasting peace in conflictual communities (Paris, 1997). Apparently, liberal peace agents are constantly promoting the ideological supremacy and emancipatory character of liberal peacebuilding in a way that presents it as the ultimate cure to a wide array of complex socio-politico maladies, which fuel and sustain insurgency and ethnic conflicts in many divided societies.

Peace and conflict scholars (Mac Ginty, 2010, 2011; Newman et al., 2009), raise criticisms against liberal peacebuilding due to its hegemonic tendency to impose western values and ideas on the global south. It is also perceived as an assertion of neo-colonialism by imperial powers in the global north, such as the European Union (see Behr, 2007). With so much emphasis on maintaining stability and containing conflict liberal peacebuilding often failed to take into account local realities and the needs of the people who are directly affected by massive internal violence (Newman, 2011). In some circumstances, liberal rhetorics and democratic norms, which provide the basis for liberal peacebuilding, are not compatible and are often in conflict with extant beliefs and institutions in conflict-riven communities. Drawing from extensive fieldwork in Southeast Asia, Africa, South America and the Pacific, Oliver Richmond heavily criticises the liberal peace for its marginalising effects on local agencies in these conflict-marred communities. He claims,

> In many post-violence environments local perceptions of the liberal peace projects and its statebuilding focus indicate it to be ethnically bankrupt, subject to double standards, coercive, conditional, acultural and relatively unconcerned with needs, social welfare, or public services, and unfeeling and insensitive towards its subjects (2011: 4).

Such a narrative on the marginalisation of local capacities for peacemaking and peacebuilding constitutes an explanation of resistance coming from various domestic actors on the ground, where the actual armed skirmishes are occurring (Mac Ginty, 2011).

Despite massive criticisms, IGOs and donor agencies have had considerable success in defending the ideological utility of the liberal peace to confront challenges posed by intrastate conflicts. They are able to present epistemological and empirical evidence that reinforces the value of liberal peacebuilding operations globally. For instance, the 2010 Human Security Report attributes the significant decline in the numbers of high-intensity domestic conflicts as a major success indicator of international peacebuilding that is built upon principles of liberalism. External interventions in post-conflict communities have received recognition for successfully preventing the resurgence and reactivation of intrastate wars, like the internationally supported peace operations in Aceh, Indonesia (see Aspinall, 2005; Törnquist, 2011). The superiority of liberal values and ideas in peacebuilding is due to the agency of its key drivers, the UN along with other donor agencies. They mobilise agents that are part of the epistemic or knowledge communities to gather scientific information through research that defends liberal peacebuilding operations. Moreover, they have the material power to incentivise influential civil society organisations, especially NGOs, to carry out their global project on democratisation. NGOs are also strategic players that are capable of transporting the liberal peace into the conflict zones in

the global south (Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Wallace, 1997). Hence, it is the contention in this paper that NGOs are the primacy agents commissioned by their liberal donors to domesticate the liberal peace in contested political environments, such as Mindanao.

Commodification of peacebuilding

The privatisation of peacebuilding is a strategic tool to domesticate the liberal peace and make it applicable in the context of domestic armed conflicts. Through the commodification of peacebuilding, wide arrays of international humanitarian organisations and NGOs have become interested in participating in peacebuilding operations in many conflict-prone communities (see Abiew and Keating, 2004). NGOs, in particular, are the primary service providers contracted by donor agencies to deliver emergency and social services to war-stricken civilians on their behalf. This is due to the inability of donors to deploy their own personnel in the conflict zones to manage and implement relief and peacebuilding activities. The level of risk and danger confronting staff of donor agencies is too high for them to directly engage and establish their presence in communities with active armed conflicts, like Mindanao (see Adriano and Parks, 2013). To compensate for their absence, donors procure the services of NGOs, which have the capacities to deliver humanitarian commodities and services to communities marred by varying intensities of violent conflict. The ability to penetrate the conflict zone, even during the height of armed tension, is the comparative advantage of NGOs over other humanitarian and peacebuilding agencies. This advantage makes NGOs appealing to bilateral and multilateral agencies as contractors that have constant access to foreign aid which finances the seemingly privatised peace operation in the southern Philippines. Given the current socio-political milieu in Mindanao, it is practical for NGOs to engage in peacebuilding in this region of the Philippines, otherwise it would be difficult for them to acquire substantial amounts of money from donors.[2] This attitude and tendency of NGOs to embark on activities that are in the "menus" of donors is critically important for their continued survival. Donors perceive them not only as agents that can be mobilised for democracy promotion. They are also seen as market players that can deliver services at a cheaper cost and with greater efficiency than governments (Korten, 1990).

The commodification of peacebuilding is a phenomenon to which peace and conflict scholars and practitioners should devote critical attention and thorough investigation. There is a need to generate empirical evidence in order to assess the impact of this privatised mode of peacebuilding. The absence of substantial proof that supports the commodification of peace and guides peacebuilding instruments and policies, activities that are meant to promote peace might possibly catalyse the intensification of war and violence, and therefore do more harm in conflictual societies (Bush, 2004). For instance, the UN mission in Kosovo spent US$456 million to finance massive emergency relief activities and failed to recognise the local agencies of the Kosovars to recoup and recover from the harsh impacts of violent conflicts. In privatised peace operations, IGOs and NGOs tend to treat "refugees as victims in need rather than survivors with strengths" (Guest, 2000 cited in Bush, 2004: 43). The commodification of peacebuilding creates a lucrative industry for NGOs, in particular to continually serve as liberal peace agents and private service providers for various donors.

This closeness between NGOs and their donors stimulates criticism from different scholars (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015; Edwards and Hulme, 1995), who question the potential and abilities of the former to genuinely promote democracy and build peace. Savelsberg (2015) presents a sceptical view of NGOs and other activist groups because of their use of their power to frame violence in a way that draws public attention and generates resources for their cause.

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[2] Interview. 8 July 2016. Davao City, Philippines.

Hence, NGOs are accused of deliberately amplifying the victimisation narratives of civilians affected by conflict to attract more funding from donors. Although NGOs are not-for-profit organisations, they gain huge amounts of money by charging transaction costs for every donor-funded project. In Mindanao, the rate of management cost that is given to NGOs is around five to ten percent of a total project cost.[3] This shows that the peacebuilding enterprise in the southern Philippines is a profitable ground for NGOs as managers and implementers of aid-funded projects. Some NGOs operating in Mindanao are criticised for merely performing activities that are dictated by donors and are not suited to the needs of conflict-stricken civilians. They are also not sensitive to local realities and practices, such as the distribution of piglets for small livelihood projects in Muslim communities. Some NGOs are not aware that pigs are considered *haram* or forbidden in Islam.[4] In a way, NGOs are simply doing their tasks of delivering aid commodities or so-called "peace packages" to the conflict zones as they are commissioned by donors. Therefore, the commodification of peace is about the establishment of incentive structures for peacebuilding agents, specifically NGOs that are obedient and loyal to donor agencies. The incentive for NGOs, which is in the form of transaction and management costs, according to Vandeninden and Paul (2012), does not add value to aid-funded development projects. Donors often boast in their reports and press releases of the huge amount of aid they have provided. In reality, a significant portion of these aid monies have been used to cover the management and other transaction costs that are retained by NGOs. Moreover, aid funds do not produce meaningful results due to rampant corruption, which is "endemic in virtually all post-conflict societies" (Orr, 2002: 148). Consequently, the qualities and quantities of aid projects at the community level are considerably less than claimed in the reports of donors and their partner NGOs.[5]

International donor agencies have a constant interest in providing foreign aid, which finances peacebuilding operations in the subnational conflict area of Mindanao. Based on the data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), Mindanao receives an annual average of US$40 million of foreign development assistance (Adriano & Parks, 2013: 34). Donors are more inclined to pour in development assistance to conflict-torn communities if a formal peace process is present. It is observed that there is diversity of bilateral and multilateral agencies in conflict-prone communities that are going through political transition (Parks, Colletta and Oppenheim, 2013). For instance, many foreign donors provided aid to finance peacebuilding activities in post-conflict Aceh, when GAM entered into negotiations and signed a peace accord with the Government of Indonesia in 2005 (see Barron, Rahmant and Nugroho, 2013). Nonetheless, foreign donors and even international NGOs started to withdraw their presence and financial support in Aceh three years after the signing of the peace agreement.[6]

In Mindanao, almost 50% of externally funded programmes have the objectives to build peace and address conflict (Adriano & Parks, 2013: 34). The increase in the amount of foreign aid by 2012 was largely influenced of the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) between the Government of the Philippines and the MILF. Foreign countries and IGOs immediately committed support to the Philippine Government in the enforcement of the FAB and facilitated democratic transition in the southern Philippines. However, there is difficulty in establishing accurate information as to how much aid has been given for peacebuilding in Mindanao. Foreign aid data from the OECD, for instance, are not disaggregated and typically are provided at the country level. Hence, it is hard to determine how much foreign development and

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[3] Interview. 8 July 2016. Davao City, Philippines.
[4] Interview. 22 August 2016. General Santos City, Philippines.
[5] Interview. 24 April 2016. Davao City, Philippines.
[6] Interview. 26 May 2016, Banda Aceh, Aceh, Indonesia.

peacebuilding assistance is poured into Mindanao by a variety of donors. Another dilemma is that peacebuilding funds are basically lumped together with other aid-funded projects in post-conflict communities (von Billerbeck, 2011). Consequently, it poses a huge challenge to the assessment and evaluation of the impacts of aid in a privatised mode of peacebuilding.

The multi-million dollar Mindanao Trust Fund (MTF) is a good example to understand how the World Bank, along with several western countries, privatised the peacebuilding operation in the southern Philippines. The MTF is a multi-donor funding facility that was created in 2005 to build the capacities of the Bangsamoro Development Authority (BDA), which is the development agency of the MILF. As of December 2016, it received a total of US$28.88 million, more than 60% of which came from the European Union (World Bank, 2016). It finances projects in various conflict-prone communities, especially those that are under the control of the MILF, using the World Bank's prescribed community-driven development scheme. Due to the legal prohibition for donors to provide grants to the rebel organisation, the World Bank appointed two NGOs that serve as fund managers. These NGOs are Community and Family Services International and the Mindanao Land Foundation, which are helping the BDA in the delivery of development projects in conflict-affected areas, including the six major and twenty-five base camps of the MILF.[7] The commodification of peacebuilding is a strategic mechanism for liberal actors, like the European Union and World Bank, to gain access in dangerous and isolated communities in the southern Philippines. It allows liberal donor agencies to demonstrate their material power and grant incentives to NGOs that are commissioned as private contractors of services for people in war-torn regions of the Philippines. Privatising the peace operation lessens the demand for donors' accountability and mobilising NGOs is important to increase the legitimacy of peacebuilding instruments, which are promoted by external liberal actors, particularly the World Bank. NGOs are instrumental in building a positive image of their donors in the international community, owing to their ability to bring peace and development in contested corners of the globe, like the war-devastated region in the southern Philippines.

Domestic variants of liberal peacebuilding

Despite the overwhelming popularity of liberal peacebuilding, scholars such as Doyle (2005), Newman et al. (2009) and Mac Ginty (2010), have pointed out that it has no concrete and definite definition Nonetheless, it is possible to identify the referents and indicators of liberal values and principles, which are persistently embedded in the peace interventions of NGOs in Mindanao. These normative values that drive the activities of peace-building NGOs are arguably the empirical manifestations of the domestic variant of the liberal peace theory, which is traditionally applied in peace and conflict studies to analyse the dynamics of inter-state conflicts.

NGOs are the major agents of liberalism in conflict-ridden Mindanao. Most of them conform to the liberal-democratic peacebuilding model, which is prescribed by IGOs and donors. To elucidate this argument, I will analyse the democracy-promotion initiatives of NGOs and identify key elements of liberal peacebuilding that are entrenched in their activities in the southern Philippines. The scholarship of Lewis (2014), Zürcher et al. (2013), Philpott (2012), Carey (2012), Warren (2011), Newman et al. (2009) and Diamond (2008) has established a consensus in the literature as to what can be called the major referents of liberal-democratic peacebuilding. As the primary representatives of civil society, NGOs are expected to perform complicated functions to aid democratisation and peacebuilding investments in conflictual societies. These functions include, but are not limited to, educating people to engage in public affairs, supporting poverty-stricken and marginalised groups, creating complex networks for war-riven populations, serving

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[7] Interview. 22 August 2016. General Santos City, Philippines.

as watchdogs and election monitors, defending human rights and creating and supporting liberal institutions in conflict-prone societies. In the southern Philippines, NGOs apparently perform one of these or a combination of these functions to help initiate democratic transition and consolidation, despite the presence of an active armed conflict.

Educating and engaging communities

The education function of NGOs involved in peace operations in Mindanao is a major indicator of liberal peacebuilding. NGOs enjoy considerable success in executing their roles in educating conflict-stricken civilians about the current peace process in the southern Philippines. They have contributed significantly to raising public awareness about the current peace talks between the Philippine Government and MILF. The conduct of a series of public consultations and discussions in various Muslim, Christian and indigenous cultural communities demonstrates that NGOs are exerting efforts to promote participation and inclusivity in the peace process.[8] Their public education activities are necessary to document and capture a variety of sentiments and diverging perspectives of different ethno-linguistic and religious groups.[9] Engaging ordinary civilians in conversation about the peace process helps legitimise the peacebuilding operation in this region of the Philippines.

Education programmes of NGOs at the community level are designed to disseminate information to ordinary civilians about the current peace deal, particularly in isolated and war-prone villages. Public education efforts are important in building constituencies for peace and democracy in Mindanao, considering that the level of literacy is low in poverty-stricken and conflict-afflicted communities.[10] People in war-torn regions have a low level of formal education and for some liberal ideas such as democracy, elections, good governance and reconciliation are of low priority at best.[11] NGOs are the strategic peacebuilding players to socialise people at the grassroots about these foreign liberal concepts that underscore the provisions of the 2012 FAB and 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). NGOs have the ability to frame these normative liberal ideas into various native languages by localising these external concepts. This mechanism allows NGOs to foster understanding of basic knowledge about democratic peacebuilding even to the uneducated and poor individuals in the conflict zone. Public education is a necessary investment to prepare and equip the conflict-riven civilians of the skills and knowledge in governance and public affairs in post-CAB Mindanao. Moreover, their education function is crucial to avert any emerging threat to the peace process. For instance, NGOs are helpful in explaining to the rebel supporters that the initial decommissioning of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, the military wing of the MILF, is not an act of surrender on the part of the insurgent organisation but a necessary measure to jump start the normalisation process in Mindanao.[12]

Working for the poor

Abject poverty is a major consequence of decades of armed conflict in Mindanao. War-torn communities in the southern Philippines are home to economically impoverished Filipinos, who have suffered the brunt of violent conflict for a long time. In the report of the Philippine National Statistical Coordination Board to the World Bank (2005: 29), conflict-prone provinces

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[8] Interview. 21 July 2016, Cotabato City, Philippines.
[9] Interview. 11 August 2016, Pasig City, Philippines.
[10] According to the Philippine Statistics Office in 2013, among all the provinces in the Philippines, the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao has the lowest basic literacy rate of 86.1%, while the national average is 96.5%.
[11] Interview. 7 August 2016. General Santos City, Philippines.
[12] Interview. 7 August 2016. General Santos City, Philippines.

(Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur) in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), except Basilan, are in the bottom ten of the poorest provinces in the Philippines. Extreme poverty in war-ridden communities in Mindanao constitutes a compelling reason for NGOs to work for the poor. The dire situation of conflict-stricken civilians is a sufficient justification for NGOs to convince donors to finance their poverty alleviation activities, which are often linked to democracy promotion.

The provision of humanitarian and relief assistance to the poor is a tactical tool employed by NGOs in transporting liberal peacebuilding in Mindanao. They have strong potential and ability to work for poor people on the margins of society. Civilians, particularly at the village level, have affirmative perceptions towards NGOs, believing that they are helping the poor and conflict-afflicted people through development projects.[13] This positive public perception is helpful for NGOs and their donors in manufacturing consent and legitimacy for their liberalism-inspired interventions in the southern Philippines. The people in the war zone not only face abject poverty, but also are victims of marginalisation and exclusion due to protracted conflicts and dysfunctional governance (Espesor, 2017). The agency of NGOs in acting as alternative service providers in the areas of public health, education and other social services makes their presence in the war zone desirable and appealing. It is also a smart and subtle mechanism of promoting liberal values and ideas among conflict-afflicted civilians, even in rebel-controlled communities.

Aiding marginalised and excluded groups

Four decades of armed skirmishes between the security forces of the state and various insurgent and millenarian groups have generated massive marginalisation and exclusion of powerless civilian communities in Mindanao. Based on ethnographic observation in the battlefield, three groups of people have been repeatedly excluded and subordinated by a series of wars and violent events. These groups are: internally displaced persons (IDP); indigenous people (IP); and women and children. Nevertheless, it is not the contention of this paper that these groups are the exclusive subjects of marginalisation and exclusion.

Displacement of the civilian population is a major consequence of violent civil conflicts. People leave and abandon their communities and homes to escape atrocities and violence (Lischer, 2007). In Mindanao, NGOs pay a considerable amount of attention to help communities that are permanently or temporarily uprooted from their respective villages due to intermittent outbreaks of armed confrontation. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) of the Norwegian Refugee Council, over four million people in the southern Philippines were displaced from 2000 to 2005. As of May 2015, the IDMC reported that about 119,000 civilians in Mindanao are still displaced due to a series of military operations and retaliatory attacks from different non-state armed groups. This alarming phenomenon of internal displacement is a compelling justification for NGOs to perform massive humanitarian relief operations. It is apparent that the major contribution of NGOs in the peace operation is the provision of emergency and relief assistance to conflict-displaced civilians. Obviously, relief operations have become the cottage industry of NGOs, owing to the constant inclination of donors to aid conflict-stricken civilians in the southern Philippines.[14]

The IP inhabitants in the conflict zone in Mindanao are susceptible to the harsh impacts of armed conflicts. Aside from the Muslim people, the IPs have been experiencing frequent displacement from their ancestral lands for decades. Based on the report of the UNHCR (2015:

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[13] Interview. 3 August 2016, General Santos City, Philippines.
[14] Interview. 21 July 2016, Cotabato City, Philippines.

10), more than 8,000 IPs remained in a displaced state and could not return to their respective villages due to precarious security conditions. For this reason, NGOs' relief operations have targeted IPs as recipients of basic aid commodities. Steven Rood (2014) of the Asia Foundation labelled the IPs as the "minorities within the minority", who are the apparent subject of exclusion and marginalisation. They are the frequent victims of human rights abuses, particularly land grabbing and extra-judicial killings, which are allegedly committed by some politically influential people in Mindanao.[15] Unfortunately, NGOs have limited capacity to safeguard and protect the rights of IPs. It is extremely dangerous for rights-based NGOs to deal with issues of land dispossession and extra-judicial killings confronting IPs in the southern Philippines.[16]

Women and their children are among the most affected groups and suffer the worst consequences of cyclical violence and conflict (Lischer, 2007). The seemingly permanent hostilities have caused massive displacement, malnutrition among children, poor health and unclean supply of water (UNICEF, 2011). In conflict-affected areas in Mindanao, humanitarian assistance from the Philippine Government, IGOs and NGOs is mostly geared towards the protection of women, children and the elderly who fled from their communities owing to armed conflict and who are staying in different evacuation camps. NGOs usually work with women in various refugee camps in Mindanao in the distribution of relief commodities, like food and medicines. It has been observed that men disappear from the evacuation centres and women are left with almost no choice but to act as heads of the family. The disappearance of men from refugee camps is documented in other conflictual societies, such as Chad in Africa (Lischer, 2007). Moreover, NGOs devote significant attention to alleviate the plight of children in evacuation camps and villages which have constant exposure to violence. Their activities for children are focused on education, health and sanitation and psychosocial interventions. These activities of NGOs for women and children may be palliative and do not have significant immediate impacts on democracy promotion. Nonetheless, the provision of humanitarian assistance to powerless groups is a strategic confidence-building mechanism for NGOs to build a positive image and reinforce their legitimacy. Conflict-weary civilians, especially children, are indirectly sensitised to the idea that NGOs and their donors are benevolent and necessary actors to bring peace in Mindanao. The constant exposure of people to NGOs and donors is a long-term tactical tool for the diffusion of liberal democratic norms and values in Mindanao.

Building of overlapping networks

The building of networks is an indicator of liberal peacebuilding due to its importance in creating democratic spaces for constructive engagements and inclusive dialogues in conflictual societies. Networks are beneficial social capital for the propagation of societal values, particularly civility, sociability and responsibility. Social networks encourage individuals to be responsible and cooperative, which is important for the promotion of a pluralist liberal democracy (Rosenblum, 1998). In chronic disaster situations, particularly armed conflict, social networks are helpful in building the resiliency of a community to cope with and mitigate the harsh impacts of war and violence. In Mindanao, NGOs pay attention to creating networks for people affected by armed conflict. They have helped IDPs in different evacuation camps to organise themselves into peoples' organisations, for them to negotiate with the AFP and MILF in the establishment of peace zones. These peace zones are specific areas within conflict-prone villages, wherein combatants, whether government or rebel forces, are not allowed to enter if they are carrying weapons. The establishment of peace zones is just one example of how NGOs facilitate the creation of networks for conflict-displaced people. The ability to build social capital is an

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[15] Interview. 23 April 2016, Davao City, Philippines.
[16] Interview. 20 July 2016, Cotabato City, Philippines.

advantage of NGOs in transporting liberal peacebuilding in the conflict zone of Mindanao. According to Banks, Hulme and Edwards (2015), NGOs have the power to create channels that link community-based organisations to a variety of local and international actors and institutions. Finally, building networks legitimises liberal peacebuilding, as it claims to give voices to marginalised and vulnerable groups. The inclusion of powerless groups is a source of legitimacy (Young, 2000).

Serving as a watchdog and protecting human rights

The watchdog and human rights protection functions of NGOs are not only difficult, but dangerous aspects of liberal peacebuilding. These functions require expertise and courage from NGOs that are involved in governance reform and human rights promotion in conflictual societies. Local power brokers are typically threatened by these liberal norms and ideas, which might generate detrimental effects on their status and legitimacy as local rulers (see Acharya, 2004). Anti-corruption and rights-based NGOs are likely to expose their anomalous and dubious activities, which might encourage the national government to file lawsuits and prosecute corrupt political leaders and human rights offenders.

Liberal peacebuilding encourages the strengthening of civil society to help in building democratic institutions in conflictual societies. Civil society organisations, particularly NGOs, are not only expected to complement the state in the delivery of social services (Leighninger, 2006), but also to challenge it to provide greater accountability, transparency and legitimacy (United Nations, 2009). To ensure the lawful use of power by politicians and bureaucrats, NGOs should act as watchdogs that monitor the transactions and activities of powerful individuals in the government (Nelson, 2007). In Mindanao, very few NGOs have the capacity and inclination to perform their watchdog function due to the apparent threat from local power brokers. Local authoritarianism in the southern Philippines constitutes a perilous playground for NGOs to serve as watchdogs (Espesor, 2017). The lack of security due to the weak rule of law in the conflict-affected communities is the biggest hindrance for NGOs to seriously monitor government transactions and demand transparency and accountability.[17]

The universality of human rights is deeply embedded in liberal democratic thinking, and therefore is taken as an apparent element of liberal peacebuilding (Lucuta, 2014). Human rights promotion is an extremely perilous function of rights-based NGOs in the southern Philippines. Most individuals accused of violating human rights are the local power holders, who have private armies, or rebel commanders and members of the security forces of the states.[18] The usual victims of gross human rights violations are powerless civilians, particularly the IPs in the hinterland of Mindanao. Consequently, very few NGOs have embarked on human rights monitoring and protection. Some NGOs are carrying out human rights advocacy in conjunction with their peacebuilding activities, which is less threatening to powerful individuals who have perpetuated human rights violations in conflict-affected communities. Apparently, the Philippines, especially the war-prone region of Mindanao, is not a conducive political environment in which to uphold human rights. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, claims that the Philippines is among the countries with "darker and more dangerous human rights situations" (Lee-Brago, 2017).

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[17] Interview, 24 April 2016. Davao City, Philippines.
[18] Interview, 20 July 2016. Cotabato City, Philippines.

Creating and supporting liberal institutions

Liberal peace agents devote a significant amount of effort and significant resources in social engineering to lay the foundation of a stable and secured society (Lemay-Hébert, 2013). Newman (2011) asserts that conflict containment and stability are the primary focus of liberal peacebuilding. The creation of democratic institutions is necessary to contain threats and achieve stability in societies marred with violent domestic armed conflicts. These democratic institutions serve as social instruments that can facilitate the consolidation of democracy in societies emerging from civil wars or insurgency conflicts. In the subnational conflict community of Mindanao, NGOs, especially those with technocratic agencies and which are part of the epistemic community, are actively involved in creating and supporting liberal institutions. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, NGOs focus on the following democratic institutions: elections, the security sector, subnational government organisations, political parties and grassroots civil societies.

Monitoring the conduct of elections in war-prone communities is a critical function of NGOs in Mindanao. Scholars like Dahl (1998) and Warren (2011) stress the crucial role of civil society in safeguarding the election as a democratic institution. NGOs, representing civil society, are expected to create enabling environments, where elections can function in a legitimate and democratic manner. The precarious security condition in the southern Philippines thwarts the capacities of NGOs to perform the election monitoring that is necessary to safeguard the legitimacy of electoral exercises in conflict-torn communities, where fraud and anomalies are reported (Carter Center, 2016). NGOs have limited engagement in election monitoring owing to imminent threats from warlord politicians and their private armies. Although they are rather weak in monitoring elections, this area of liberal peacebuilding is not totally abandoned. Some rights-based NGOs are involved in the documentation of electoral malfeasance and human rights violations, as well as the conduct of voters' education among ordinary civilians in the conflict zone (Carter Center, 2016).

The Philippine security sector has become the area of concern of liberal peacebuilding NGOs, particularly in Mindanao. The transformation of the security sector is a crucial aspect of democratisation, achieved by reinforcing governance that enables the state to effectively manage domestic armed conflicts and deter all forms of violence and acts of terrorism (Banlaoi, 2010). Security and peace, according to Wulf (2004), are social commodities that facilitate development. For this reason, some technocratic NGOs in Mindanao are engaged in security sector reform (SSR) to transform the security agencies of the state, the military and police, from institutions of coercion into constituents of peace. They focus on educating soldiers and policemen on how to restore and improve their relationships with members of the communities in the conflict zone. Educating the members of the state security forces about non-violent methods of settling disputes, conciliatory dialogues and cultural and historical underpinnings of armed conflict is critically important to initiate reconciliation in Mindanao. For instance, Muslim civilians in the Sulu Province called the soldiers *satro* or enemy of Allah (CRT Core Group, 2013). This demonised image of Philippine soldiers is ubiquitous in many parts of Mindanao due to gruesome massacres (Jabidah, Manili and Malisbong) of Muslim people perpetuated by the military during the martial law era (Mindanews, 2014; Salic-Macasalong, 2014). NGOs' effort on SSR is strategic to reinforce the legitimacy and popularity of liberal peacebuilding. Knowledge products, such as learning modules, which have been utilised for SSR activities are heavily saddled with liberal ideas and notions of peace and security. Obvious indicators of liberal peacebuilding, like good governance, human rights and development are evident and incorporated in the SSR modules (see Institute for Autonomy and Governance, 2015).

The support of political elites and other social forces is crucial for democratisation to yield success (Carey, 2012). In Mindanao, NGOs understand the urgency of including and engaging local political gatekeepers in the peace process. Local power holders felt excluded from the formal peace process as the attention of the national government is focused on negotiating with the MILF.[19] Consequently, local political elites in the southern Philippines are posing resistance to the peace agreements, which they perceive as a wish list of entitlements that favour the political agenda of the MILF.[20] The feeling of local politicians of being sidelined might compromise the current gains of the peace process. The "reallocation of power and authority will generate, reignite, or intensify pre-existing or budding power struggles that can lead to further conflict" (United Nations, 2007: 2). With this anticipated danger, some technocratic NGOs devote attention of supporting local governance by engaging gatekeepers, comprised of formal and traditional leaders in Mindanao. Local governments are the first point of contact for war-affected civilians to seek social protection. Local politicians are closer to their constituents and more knowledgeable of the local problems. Their unwillingness to cooperate and implement the provisions of the FAB and CAB might likely spoil the current peace process. They are not even afraid to antagonise rebel forces, as they claim that they have more weapons than the MILF. Some technocratic NGOs are providing a venting space for the inclusion of governors, mayors and other influential customary leaders as part of their liberal peacebuilding activities of empowering local and traditional institutions.[21] Local government, in particular, is an institution that can play a crucial role in democracy promotion in war-ridden communities. It can also serve as a repository and promoter of democratic norms and values, which is strategic to ensure the continued relevance and ideational power of liberal peacebuilding. Moreover, local government is the frontline defence against radicalism and extremism in Mindanao (Lanto, 2017).

Finally, the development of local political parties and civil society in the southern Philippines by NGOs is a clear indicator of the domestic variant of the liberal peace. From a liberal democratic standpoint, political parties are institutions of democracy that facilitate public participation in the affairs of the state, particularly in influencing policy, voting in the election, engaging and criticising political leaders, and vying for positions in public office. In electoral democracy, political parties offer the public a choice in governance and encourage those in opposition to exact transparency and accountability from the ruling parties (National Democratic Institute, 2017. It also accommodates multiple perspectives and even conflicting interests of people, and thereby contributes to the construction of a pluralist society (Hofmeister and Grabow, 2011). In a post-conflict environment, party development is a common peacebuilding tool employed by peace actors, particularly NGOs (for examples, see Curtis and de Zeeuw, 2009; Dudouet, 2012). The creation of political parties allows armed groups to undergo transition from revolutionary organisations into democratic institutions that can compete for political power by participating in electoral exercises. Hence, political parties are seen as instruments for a peaceful transfer and sharing of power after years of violent wars in conflictual societies (Carbone, 2003). In Mindanao, technocratic NGOs with financial assistance from the European Union are in the frontline of building political parties and civil society organisations, despite the presence of an active armed conflict. These NGOs focus on developing existing local political parties, particularly the MILF's United Bangsamoro Justice Party and the Centrist Democratic Party. They are also engaged in building civil society that represents groups of women, IPs, youth and other marginalised sectors in Mindanao. The goal of political party and civil society development is to equip different local political and civil society formations to engage in parliamentary and democratic governance, once the Bangsamoro is constituted as a new political entity in the Philippines.[22] The initiative of

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[19] Interview. 21 July 2016. Cotabato City, Philippines.
[20] Interview. 18 August 2016. General Santos City, Philippines.
[21] Interview. 21 July 2016. Cotabato City, Philippines.
[22] Interview. 11 August 2016. Makati City, Philippines.

NGOs in supporting local parties and civil society organisations contributes in legitimising liberal peacebuilding owing to its claim of opening up democratic spaces in war-torn communities, wherein warlord clans are the dominant power holders.[23]

Conclusion

Conflict-ridden Mindanao has become a conducive "theatre of action" (Aron, 2003: 54) for IGOs and donor agencies to domesticate and reinforce the ideological value of the liberal peace. The application and widespread popularity of that peace in the southern Philippines demonstrates its fluidity and dynamism in the context of intrastate conflict. The strength of the liberal peace lies in its ability to acclimatise and adjust according to the conditions of conflictual societies (Mac Ginty, 2011). The design of peace operations in Mindanao is favourable for external actors to promote such a "positive epistemology of peace" (Richmond, 2011: 124), which illustrates the supremacy of liberal democratic norms. The domestication of the liberal peace involves the process of localising peace formation in Mindanao. Its champions and promoters are exerting a significant amount of effort and significant resources to preserve the ideological relevance and hegemony of the liberal peace in post-Cold War global politics. Despite the existence of an active armed conflict, IGOs and donors are apparently aggressive in promoting the value of liberal peacebuilding that is focused on democracy promotion and integration of conflict-prone but resource-rich communities into the market economy.

Mindanao's precarious security condition constitutes a major obstacle for IGOs and donors to carry out their global democracy project through liberal peacebuilding. Nonetheless, the liberal peace is able to touch the ground of war-torn Mindanao via NGOs, which are the key players in the peace operation. The commodification of liberal peacebuilding by IGOs and donors creates an incentive structure for NGOs that have the inclination and expertise to perform peacebuilding activities, notwithstanding the perils in the conflict zone. These activities are inspired by liberal norms and cosmopolitan approaches, especially democracy, human rights and good governance. Moreover, foreign aid is the primary operator of liberal peacebuilding. NGOs are commissioned as private service contractors (Korten, 1990) by donors to provide technocratic solutions to a wide array of complex and multi-layered problems of armed conflict in this part of the Philippines. The persistent interest of the donor community to finance the peace operation in Mindanao makes liberal peacebuilding a lucrative enterprise for NGOs, which are thriving and increasingly dependent on donors' money. The constant flow of peacebuilding aid to Mindanao serves as a guarantee and source of motivation for liberal agents, especially NGOs, to continually domesticate the liberal peace as a cure for social illnesses brought about by decades of domestic armed conflict. The Mindanao case presents interesting insights on the linkages between liberal democracy and the political economy of peacebuilding. It illustrates that the ideological power of liberalism, specifically its promise of peace in conflictual societies, is contingent on the material power of its liberal agents. This material power is apparently demonstrated in the ability of donors to grant aid to liberal actors as incentives and rewards for their cooperation and contribution in bolstering and intensifying the ideational appeal of the liberal peace.

This case study infers that the applicability of the liberal peace is not limited to interstate wars. It is also employed by liberal agents in the context of intrastate conflicts, as in Mindanao, with the same goal of installing liberal democracy and a market-orientated economy. Different ontological and empirical referents of what can be called the domestic variants of the liberal peace are regularly embedded in peacebuilding activities of NGOs. These peace interventions of NGOs that shed some light in understanding the domestic version of the liberal peace are: educating and

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[23] Interview. 12 August 2016. Makati City, Philippines.

engaging conflict-affected people into political affairs; working for the poor in the conflict zone; aiding marginalised and excluded groups; building networks and the social capital of war-stricken civilians; serving as a watchdog; and protecting human rights. Moreover, NGOs in Mindanao perform technocratic and complex functions of creating and supporting liberal institutions through election monitoring, SSR, participatory local governance, and development of local political parties and civil society. These indicators of the domestic variant of the liberal peace have striking similarities with its international version, with some modifications and alterations, which cater to local realities and extant social forces in Mindanao. The interaction between the exogenous liberal peace and endogenous epistemology of peace is theoretically conceptualised as hybridisation (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2011). The domestication of the liberal peace is demonstrative of its fluid and dynamic characterisation. Its ability to deal with domestic wars reinforces its ideological power as a desirable model of peacebuilding that is strategic in manufacturing consent and the legitimacy of its agents.

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