



Learning Paper

January
2017

Women's meaningful participation in peace: Lessons from the Bangsamoro (Mindanao, Philippines)

Implementing people and organisations:

Jurma Tikamasan, Fatima Allian, Dayang Bahidjan and Julaiza Magtangob, from **Nisa Ul Haqq**. This is a Bangsamoro women's group that uses Islamic teaching as a framework for women's and men's empowerment towards engagement on an international, national, regional and local level, for the promotion of women's human rights, sustainable development, and peaceful co-existence of tribes, religions, nations and of women and men.

Froilyn Mendoza, Haydee Mokudef and Ronnie Ampok, from **Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization (TLWOI)**, a federation of 35 community-based women's organisations of indigenous peoples in the province of Maguindanao (Mindanao). TLWOI aims to support women in attaining their sustainable development, while respecting their indigenous cultures and the promotion of basic development rights as tribal women, including the right to decision making processes, community development, and justice and peace.

Noraida Abo, Frenz Laureta, Sandra Abu and Ashnia Juanday, from **United Youth of the Philippines-Women (UnYPhil-Women)**, a non-profit women-youth organisation. UnYPhil-Women aims to: promote and advocate the rights of women and their protection against violence; encourage women's participation in nation and peacebuilding; empower

women through education, capacity building and livelihood assistance; and inculcate self-esteem and self worth among women through confidence and social integration.

Jasmin Nario-Galace, Iverly Viar and Ana Natividad, from **Women Engaged in Action on 1325 (WE Act 1325)**, a national network of 39 women's groups, peace and human rights organisations, with a focus on implementing the Philippines National Action Plan (NAP) on Women Peace and Security. It works to advance the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, in the community and at the national levels, through the localisation of the NAP, active engagement in the peace process, research and capacity-sharing.

Coordinating organisation:

Conciliation Resources, an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. Conciliation Resources' work in the Philippines is informed by gender analysis and a commitment to women's empowerment for a transformative peace process. The projects were managed by Irene dela Torre and Paul Adolfo, under the guidance of Kristian Herbolzheimer as Programme Director. Sanne Tielemans (Senior Gender Adviser) and Clodagh Miskelly (Head of Monitoring and Learning) also contributed.

This paper summarises the work and the results of three consecutive 10-month projects funded by the Human Rights and Democracy fund of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office between May 2013 and March 2016.

This work complemented a wider project on building peace in Mindanao through public participation in governance, which was also coordinated by Conciliation Resources and funded by the European Union between July 2013 and June 2016).



Introduction

The importance of women's meaningful participation and the consequent need to address the absence of women in peace processes has been widely acknowledged, notably after the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325) in 2000 on women's protection and empowerment. Women's participation is not only an issue of justice but also a fundamental condition towards ensuring a sustainable and transformative peace process.

However, implementation of this resolution has been slow and much is still to be learned about how to move forward in practical terms. Each peace process therefore offers the opportunity to innovate and thereby contribute to the global knowledge on how to improve the quality of a peace process.

This paper reflects on the achievements and the challenges of four civil society organisations in the Philippines who worked together on the Mindanao peace process between 2013 and 2016, with support from Conciliation Resources and the British Embassy in Manila.

The purpose of the paper is to share reflections and learning from this experience to inform decisions on planning and the funding of other initiatives that contribute to women's meaningful participation in peace.

Summary lessons learned

For an increased impact of the work on women's empowerment it is fundamental to:

- 1. Understand and respond to the diversity of perspectives, needs and expectations among women.** This is especially relevant and challenging in a context where custom and religion may clash with the purpose of women's empowerment.
- 2. Work in partnership with different yet complementary people and organisations.** This requires a horizontal dialogue (as equals) between donor agency, implementing organisations and institutions; as well as skills and commitment to navigate complex social, cultural and political relations.
- 3. Engage with power-holders at all levels in order to change attitudes and behaviours.** Engagement is easier said than done, as it requires understanding of power-dynamics, asserting your own authority, resisting manipulation, and confronting internal contradictions.

Context

After 15 years of negotiations, and over four decades of armed conflict, in October 2012 the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed a Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) that laid out a road map to peace. Two years later the parties signed a Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), which put an end to armed conflict by offering the Muslim minority in the Philippines significant levels of self-governance.

In response to intense lobbying from civil society, and after long discussions at the negotiating table, both parties agreed on the "right of women to meaningful political participation, and protection from all forms of violence" (section VI, article 1g of the FAB).

This single provision opened a window of opportunity to redefine social, legal and institutional arrangements related to gender and peacebuilding in the Bangsamoro region.

About the project

Between 2013 and 2016 four civil society partner organisations and Conciliation Resources engaged in a series of activities to translate this provision to practice. This work was supported by the British Embassy in Manila through the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRD) of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), as well as by the European Union.

The four partners worked together along three strands of activities:

- **Awareness raising, training and consultations** with women from different communities in the Bangsamoro region, to draft policy recommendations.
- **Advocacy and lobbying** to peace implementation bodies and Congress to ensure that women's priorities and perspectives inform the institutionalisation of the peace agreement.
- Joint **planning and assessment** between all project partners every two-three months.

Main achievements

- Partners engaged in consultations and trainings with over three thousand women in the Bangsamoro, and captured their needs, expectations and policy recommendations in three main documents (see 'Main project outputs' on page 7).

- Partners developed skills for engaging and successfully influenced institutions such as the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, the Joint Normalisation Committee, the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission as well as the Congress and the Senate.
- The project significantly increased partners' visibility and recognition among civil society organisations, government institutions and the international community, thus contributing to their leading role in sustaining the project achievements.
- Unexpected positive results included invitations for project partners to present at international events in London: *the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict* (June 2014); and at the 15th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325 in New York (October 2015).
- The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office commended this project for its approach and its achievements in their evaluation of the Human Rights and Democracy programme in 2015.

External conducive factors

- The Philippines has a powerful record of social activism. Civil society organisations have long been leading on women's empowerment in the Asian context. Other women's organisations and networks have been working along similar lines with this project – our joint efforts had a complementary effect.
- During the implementation of this project the Government of the Philippines was deeply committed to women's equality and empowerment, therefore creating an enabling environment.
- Conciliation Resources is a member of the International Contact Group that advises the peace panels of the government and the MILF, as well as the Malaysian facilitator. This offers direct and trusted access to key players in the peace process, which has been important for linking the grassroots activists to policymakers.

Lessons learned

1. Understanding diversity

“[...] We found that it can be that women do not want to participate, women are limiting themselves, or women are participating because they are representatives of their

brothers or their husbands and sons. And from those perspectives what we had to work on first was how to create a common understanding that women should be participating meaningfully and politically in the peace process.”

Women are not a homogenous group. Within any community there are multiple identities, affiliations, interests, and expectations that shape women's views and responses to conflict.

The Bangsamoro is an extremely diverse society, with a majority Muslim population but with significant non-Islamised indigenous communities (IPs), and with non-indigenous Christian peoples. At the same time, the Muslim and non-Muslim indigenous communities are composed of multiple ethno-linguistic groups and tribes, which sometimes have a stronger identity-bond than the overall Bangsamoro identity.

The four implementing partners in this project represented this diversity. Two organisations are Muslim (Nisa Ul Haq and UnYPhil), one is IP (TLWOI), and the fourth one is a national network with mainly Christian constituents (WE Act 1325). Working together was at times a challenge in itself and required open minds and the willingness and ability to overcome their own mutual prejudices. This required an enabling environment and constant management of sensitivities by all partners.

All four organisations share a common commitment to women's empowerment. But in the Bangsamoro, the diversity of views and experiences of women include those that challenge the idea of women's engagement or interpret meaningful participation in very different ways.

It was therefore important to engage with and listen to many women to learn about the range of experiences and perspectives, the barriers and constraints to and appetite for participation. It was fundamental to create spaces in which women of multiple identities and affiliations had the opportunity to share their perspectives and priorities and find common ground.

For this reason partners organised two rounds of dialogue with other women's organisations to draft a common agenda: the *Women's Contributions for a Better Bangsamoro for All*. Partners and other groups further planned and successfully organised two Women's Summits, which became the first ever space for joint advocacy among women from different ethnic, geographic and political backgrounds.

Some women who attended consultations had no previous experience of discussing peace and

governance issues or articulating their own priorities publicly. It was therefore also important to share contextual information about the peace process, and to create opportunities for women to speak from their own experience.

All in all, the project managed to respond to diversity and support an enabling environment for inclusive dialogue. But this is a long-term endeavour. It requires a strong commitment to sustain a permanent dialogue and also to overcome external challenges such as competition among organisations for visibility, acknowledgement and limited funds.

2. Promote horizontal partnership

“We have this different expertise. We have Conciliation Resources in the International Contact Group who are sitting in the peace process itself and can ensure that women’s policies are already in place. We have the TLWOI who are working with IP women to create this common understanding. We have WE Act 1325 who are doing lobbying of lawmakers at the centre of the fight in Congress. And we have Nisa Ul Haq who have a very rich experience of working with men and religious leaders and make them understand the need for women’s political participation. And of course UnYPhil-Women and its expertise working with community women. So we try to cover different sectors because that is the challenge of how to get women to work in political participation, to get everyone to work together.”

A key aspect of the success of this project has been the partnership that was carefully established to build on existing initiatives.

In a complex conflict setting no one has all the answers on how to make change happen. A well functioning partnership can be greater than the sum of its parts if it brings together people and organisations with a diverse range of perspectives, skills, networks and resources, and with a shared vision and the willingness to work together.

The three Mindanao-based partners were members of the WE Act 1325 national network. However they represented different constituencies, and had not worked together before. At the same time the WE Act 1325 secretariat had not been directly involved in working in the Bangsamoro.

Beyond the common purpose of enhancing women’s participation, the glue that brought the partners and also the donor together was the shared trust in

Conciliation Resources as the project coordinator. This trust had developed through previous collaborations over several years.

The first action of Conciliation Resources when it decided to focus on women’s empowerment, back in 2009, had been to map and to carefully listen to the existing civil society initiatives, and to identify ways of supporting them that did not necessarily require funding. This entailed activities such as providing comparative learning from other contexts, securing invitations to international forums, or linking them to potential donors. At the same time Conciliation Resources and the British Embassy had developed a trusted relation by working together in the International Contact Group.

Other fundamental approaches and attitudes for a functioning partnership include:

- Everyone’s willingness to push the boundaries of their comfort zone. This requires patience, suspension of judgement to accommodate each others’ uniqueness, and a proactive engagement among partners. It also requires a humble attitude towards a horizontal relationship where all partners understand and respect the complementary nature of each participant.
- Donor commitment beyond funding. The British Embassy understood the value of engaging with civil society and perceiving the needs and expectations at the grassroots level, and thus provided additional support by disseminating the partner activities in the embassy’s monthly bulletin, attending meetings with the partners, and hosting partner events at the embassy. This commitment reassured project partners in their decision-making and empowered them to engage naturally with national and international stakeholders.
- Building-in opportunities for joint analysis and reflection in the project design. As one partner described it, there was a sense of independence in the conduct of each partner’s activities and yet there was space to consult, collaborate and do consensus-building; to gradually build trust and familiarity and cede/take control, to enable effective collaboration and the ability to stick together to get through tough times.

“Especially as we were trying to persuade women to participate in a peace process that had so many bottlenecks, that has had so many challenges itself, the positive part of the partnership was to always stick together and to be very fluid and to look

at the different scenarios and to adapt our strategies in accordance with what was happening.”

While the partnership was a success, it was not always a smooth process. The section below indicates some of the tensions that arose.

3. Engaging with powerholders is important but challenging

“To change structures you have to address those who hold the power. Where men predominantly hold power you need to engage with them and demonstrate the importance and value of women’s participation; to recognise gender equity and women being involved in decision-making.”

While the three Mindanao-based organisations were used to working at the grassroots level, they were less experienced in lobbying policymakers. Advocacy was the domain of the WE Act 1325 network; but the project pushed even the network to think and move beyond their traditional comfort zone.

The implementation of the CAB was contingent on the passage of an enabling law in Congress. The government and the MILF nominated a Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) to draft this law. The project therefore identified the need to engage with the BTC first, and eventually with Congress in order to ensure the entrenchment of the rights of women to “meaningful participation”.

The working assumption was that the success of the advocacy efforts would hinge on project partners consulting with a wide number of women in conflict-affected areas; ensuring the diversity of women’s perspectives were taken into consideration; and identifying the right people to lobby.

This assumption proved correct but insufficient.

The project had indeed significant achievements: partners engaged in consultations and trainings with over three thousand women in the Bangsamoro, and captured their needs, expectations and policy recommendations in three main documents which had wide circulation; in 2013 Conciliation Resources and the BTC signed a Memorandum of Agreement, which explicitly mentions the purpose of “entrenching women’s participation in the Basic Law” and endorsed the partner consultations; at the Women’s Summit that same year the Chair of the BTC expressed that “participation of women in the Bangsamoro Government in the future is assured”; and partners indeed managed to ensure gender-

sensitive language was included in the multiple drafts of the Enabling Law produced by Congress.

However, Congress failed to pass the enabling law and the internal cohesion of the partner organisations was severely tested with the political manoeuvring of members of Parliament. Some MPs were strong gender champions and would indeed endorse the rights of women (and also of indigenous peoples). But others had a different agenda and seemed to endorse this advocacy for the sake of their own political interest, which was to undermine the draft law presented by the BTC and the President. These petty attitudes by some members of Congress caught partners somewhat off-guard and created some tensions among them.

All in all, the advocacy experience had several lessons learned:

- Partners realised their tendency to engage with like-minded organisations and policymakers, and the need to reach out to those who think differently from them.
- Engagement is easier said than done, as it requires understanding of power-dynamics, asserting your own authority, resisting manipulation, and confronting internal contradictions.
- It is fundamental to situate advocacy for women’s rights in the political framework of the conflict. While a peace process is an opportunity to redefine social, legal and institutional arrangements, the impact of advocacy increases if it is embedded in the broader discourse of challenging unjust power-relations.

Conclusions and challenges

“We now have the confidence to sit down with others and share our knowledge. But we should also seek opportunities for new knowledge around the peace process as it develops – during the three years of the project we became knowledgeable about community security and transitional justice because it was a focus of the peace process.”

The implementation of the 2014 Comprehensive Peace Agreement has been hampered by the inability of Congress to turn the peace agreement into law before the end of the Aquino administration (June 2016). A new government under President Duterte is trying to complete this unfinished business by proposing a new enabling law to Congress, and even changing the Constitution.

The increased capacities and awareness among civil society (the four project partners as well as other organisations) have laid the foundations for what is to become a long-term endeavour to heal the wounds of decades of armed conflict and address the multiple layers of security challenges.

An important gain has been to make significant steps towards the normalisation of women's participation. The project has contributed to shifts in the perceptions and actions of male, elite power-holders and influencers towards a level of acceptance of a women's right to participate and the value of women's engagement: key institutions such as the MILF, the transition panels and male-led civil society organisations are inviting women to participate in some activities and are more regularly consulting with them.

As a result of training and mentoring, there have also been shifts in women's own perceptions, knowledge, skills and actions that have resulted in their increasingly diverse and more meaningful participation. Many women consulted for this publication have been made aware that they have the right to participate in governance, peace and

security. The Enabling Law might not have been passed, but the change in women's beliefs and attitudes and the skills they acquired cannot be taken away.

Certainly, serious challenges remain, both external and internal. The impasse has led to significant uncertainties for civil society organisations, both political and financial. While there is a need for continued capacity-building, there is also a perceived consultation fatigue among communities and organisations that have been a perennial target. There is a need for larger-scale action and transformation, which will necessarily have to be led by public administration, whether local, regional or national.

The biggest challenge, but at the same time opportunity for Mindanao-based civil society organisations in general, and for the ones advocating for women's empowerment in particular, is to move away from a reactive approach to the latest humanitarian or political emergency or donor policy priority, to more long-term strategic planning that can sustain proactive efforts to ensure sustainable, inclusive and transformative peace.

Main project outputs

- A document and video on *Women's Contributions for a Better Bangsamoro for All*, which was the product of 72 consultations with 2750 women and a major Women's Summit in 2014. This material informed the drafting of the Bangsamoro Basic Law by the Bangsamoro Transition Commission.
- A *Women's Declaration on Participation* (March 2015) and a research report on *Operationalising women's meaningful participation in the Bangsamoro* (September 2015), which were the results of 21 workshops with 700 women (2016). These documents informed the engagement and advocacy with the agreement implementing bodies: the government and the MILF implementing teams; the Joint Normalisation Committee; the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission; as well as Congress and Senate.
- *Women's voices in the Bangsamoro: Experiences and expectations in conflict and peace* – a coffee table book which presents the stories of 32 women from different generations, geographical areas and walks of life and highlights the significant roles they have been playing through the years in vertical and horizontal peace processes in Muslim Mindanao.

Further reading

Herbolzheimer, Kristian (2015). *The peace process in Mindanao, the Philippines: evolution and lessons learned*. NOREF. <http://www.c-r.org/resources/peace-process-mindanao-philippines>

WE Act 1325. Women Peace and Security in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. A civil society report. http://weact1325.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/WEACT_CSReport_March23_2016_4website.pdf



Conciliation Resources

Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road
London NW5 1AL
United Kingdom

Telephone +44 (0)20 7359 7728 Fax +44 (0)20 7259 4081

Email cr@c-r.org Website www.c-r.org

[Facebook.com/ConciliationResources](https://www.facebook.com/ConciliationResources)

[Twitter.com/CRbuildpeace](https://twitter.com/CRbuildpeace)

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