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After years of internal strife between the Philippine government and rebel forces, an agreement was signed in autumn 2012 to end hostilities and begin the long road of creating sustainable peace. A key actor in these efforts is the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, which since 2000 has run peacebuilding programmes and trainings, at first implemented within the Filipino context and later extended to the Asia-Pacific region.

Mindanao, Philippines

Conflict transformation training making a difference in Asian communities

Gabrielle Aziza Sagara

Much euphoria and hope enveloped Mindanao and the entire Philippines on October 15, 2012, when representatives from the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), after years of conflict and violence from both sides, formally signed what is now dubbed as the “most important document” that aims to end the adversarial relationship of the two parties: the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB)¹. For many peacebuilders and peace advocates in the country and in other parts of the world, this is a long-awaited milestone towards achieving sustainable peace in conflict-torn Mindanao, and an affirmation that, through genuine dialogue and proper consultation of all stakeholders, people can come to an agreement – though it will take time.

FAB is a recognition, as well, of the long, arduous and unceasing efforts by countless peacebuilders in the country working in the affected communities, and not only of those who were involved directly in the peace negotiations. It is important to note that a myriad of peace initiatives were implemented by different actors on the ground to help make people in the communities cognizant of what genuine and lasting peace is and to strengthen their yearning to put an end to the hostilities as soon as possible. But as much as it is a recognition, it is also a reminder – a reminder that the work of building peace and restoring justice does not end in the signing of a peace agreement. Words must be translated

into action and for that to be possible, social transformation must happen in the communities.

Part of the work that needs to be done in order for people to move from conflict-ridden to peaceful and just communities is increasing the skill set and degree of knowledge of peacebuilding of all actors from every sector in society. Here lies the significance of training programmes in the Philippines that are focused on equipping individuals and communities with the necessary tool set and understanding to transform conflict into something positive.

Since 2000, one such programme has been initiated in the Philippines to ad-

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dress the need of empowering individuals and communities in order to achieve social transformation and strengthen peacebuilding initiatives in the Philippines and the Asia-Pacific region. Grassroots peacebuilders, civil society leaders, community development workers, local and national government officials, educators, activists, youth leaders, indigenous peoples, spiritual leaders from different

faiths, and even personnel from the security sector coming from the Philippines and outside the country have gathered in the heart of the second largest island in the archipelago for three weeks of intensive training and experience-sharing. From its humble beginnings, the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI) has grown to become one of the most sought-after training institutions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Long road to MPI

The history of MPI can be traced back to 1996 when peacebuilding programmes in Mindanao began to appear and mature as a result of the signing of the peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front. It was during this time that the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) moved beyond its relief work and pioneered the Peace and Reconciliation Programme within the organisation.

In 1998, as part of its Peace and Reconciliation Programme, CRS sent the first Filipino delegation to the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University in the USA. Eight Filipinos returned to their home country invigorated by the idea of replicating a model similar to the Summer Peacebuilding Institute.

Working with John Paul Lederach and reaching out to various groups across Mindanao, CRS began to design a training programme that would answer the demand for training and technical support for local grassroots peacebuilding



This is not goodbye, this is just the beginning. Before returning to their respective areas, facilitators, participants and staff at the 2011 training bid each other farewell while signifying that a sense of camaraderie has been created among them all.

initiatives. However, sister organisations in the Asia-Pacific region encouraged CRS to internationalise the initiative. According to John Paul Lederach, “MPI emerged as an answer to the question of sustainability, that is, how to get closer to the context. [...] it is [also] a resource that is accessible and less costly to people in the region [Asia].”²

CRS, in collaboration with Mennonite Central Committee, organised the first MPI Annual Peacebuilding Training in the city of Davao, Mindanao, Philippines, in 2000. The two-week peacebuilding training was attended by both local and international facilitators and participants. It was a courageous feat considering that during those times security was an issue in Mindanao because of the violence that erupted in many parts of the island after the then President Joseph Estrada declared an “all out war” against the MILF.

From 2001 to 2009, through the collective efforts of international and grassroots organizations, MPI opened its doors to many innovations: adding community exposure courses in 2003, providing a scholarship programme that targets women, youth, indigenous peoples, religious and community leaders in 2004, welcoming more than just conventional “peace activists”, such as military professionals in 2005, reaching out to younger generations of leaders through the secretariat and internship programme beginning in 2005, documenting activities and grounding itself in critical assessment, and working to strengthen the networks among its alumni.

In 2009, a decade since its birth, MPI finally realised its dream by becoming an independent, legally incorporated foundation in the Philippines in the hope of better achieving its goals as an international training institute with a strong Mindanawan flavour.

To date, thirteen trainings have taken place in Davao City with the participation of almost 1,665 peacebuilders from more than forty countries across Asia-Pacific and other parts of the world. In the past years, MPI has grown and evolved but remains true to its goal of educating and empowering peacebuilding scholars and practitioners, enhancing and contributing to the body of knowledge in the field of peace and conflict studies, promoting the conception of unique and practical peace initiatives, linking peacebuilding organisations in the country and the region, and striving towards a global environment of just peace.

Conflict transformation as core framework

Since its inception, MPI has been integrating the precepts and practices of the conflict transformation theory in different ways. In the MPI trainings, in particular, the framework is embedded in the content of the courses in terms of the principles, concepts, and the analytical tools introduced and employed in the lectures and the activities. According to Reina Neufeld of CRS, there are several reasons for the preference of this theory over others, such as conflict management or conflict resolution.

The emphasis that the theory assigns to relationships, as well as to peace and reconciliation are important factors because of its compatibility with Asian cultures.³ In addition, it is considered as an adequate framework for addressing the Mindanao conflict because of its notion that conflict, *per se*, is a normal and neutral fact of life. This is particularly relevant for those who work constantly within a conflict-ridden environment, because this framework will help them understand and recognise that conflict can be transformed into something positive.

Education, praxis, reflection

The primary goal of MPI as an institute with an educational mandate is to transform society through the promotion of the values of peace and reconciliation. The process of social transformation entails more than capacity-building through training of skills and deepening of knowledge. For change to be long-term and extensive, it must permeate structures and systems. In light of this, MPI’s approach in facilitating such a process is three-fold: education, praxis, and reflection.

Central to the education component is the annual three-week intensive training where MPI takes on an elicitive and participative approach to learning and teaching. This approach emphasises that the trainee’s knowledge is the primary source of learning and the facilitator’s role is to create an environment where the trainees can explore their own knowledge and values regarding conflict, and make their own conclusions based on their needs and context.⁴ This approach allows the trainees to take ownership of the outcomes of their learning experience. Consequently, the alumni will have a better grasp of what they have gained from the experience, in turn giving them a deeper sense of empowerment as peacebuilders. The facilitators at MPI also recognise that teaching and learning is two-way between them and the participants. In the classroom-based courses, the facilitators employ interactive activities such as role-playing, simulations, small-group reflections, games, case studies and the like in the learning process to generate active participation from the trainees.

The learning process is incomplete without application of the knowledge and skills gained at the training in various

settings and through various methodologies. The second component is relevant in determining how the lessons are infused in actual situations. MPI acknowledges that the application of learning – using the theory of change model of conflict transformation – may occur at different levels: personal, relational, structural, and cultural.⁵ The Institute supports its alumni with the praxis component through a follow-up programme for selected scholars and through spin-off activities. These activities mainly consist in assistance to similar peace institutes in other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Sri Lanka and South Korea, through consultation and/or mutual sharing of human and material resources.

In the future, MPI intends to be a relevant resource centre in grassroots peacebuilding, not only to benefit the Philippines but also the Asia-Pacific region. In this way, the learning process does not end with the alumni, the organisations in which they work and the communities where they work, but it transcends this by contributing to a greater network of peacebuilders in the region and the world.

Catalyst of social transformation

First and foremost, the root of MPI's impact is in the individual. In the documentation process done in 2006, in many interviews and group discussions, the alumni agreed that MPI taught them that global change starts with personal transformation, and that MPI and its methodology contributed to improving their personal skills and enhanced their potential as human beings.

Some of those who participated in the trauma healing course shared how their own personal traumas brought about by their experiences in the field were addressed and healed during the course. There also are numerous testimonials of how the trainings at MPI enabled participants to deepen their understanding and commitment to peace and justice. These transformations are ultimately essential to start the process of transforming communities.

The process then moves from the individual to an organisation and/or community. The alumni apply what they have learned in their own organisations, projects, and communities, enriching their activities by integrating new visions, approaches and methodologies learned at MPI. Oftentimes, the alumni echo the

lessons learned in their courses to the communities and/or their organisations by conducting similar but smaller trainings that are modified to fit their own local context. The MPI training creates a pool of trainers, mediators, facilitators, researchers and advocacy leaders. A replication of the transformation then occurs within these communities and organisations.

Specific examples of the impact of MPI: A Filipino civilian peacekeeper working in South Sudan incorporated insights and ideas from the training he received at MPI into security and protection modules he produced. A director of a civil society organisation in India was able to strengthen a network of activists and peacebuilding organisations in Tamil Nadu that promotes peace among the untouchable subgroups. A Cambodian working for an international organisation compiled a manual on peacebuilding, which includes a module on trauma healing intended for victims of the Khmer Rouge brutality. An Afghan peace programme officer was able to develop technical proposals on peace issues and practice mediation in transforming family and community conflicts. A Filipina NGO worker developed a campaign against *rido* (clan feud) and facilitated a series of dialogues in Mindanao to settle the *rido* between two warring clans. Through partnership with other Mindanawan organisations such as the Bishops-Ulama Conference, MPI contributed to the popularisation of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao.⁶

In the Philippines, overall, it can be said that MPI has contributed to the building of local capacity, reinforcing the value of ongoing peacebuilding efforts and transforming and invigorating individuals and organisations engaged in peacebuilding. In the Asia-Pacific region, MPI has been a pioneer in elicitive, empowerment-focused education in conflict transformation, in connecting grassroots leaders with academic, religious and government level actors, and in marrying theoretical and practical education within a conflict setting. Several other organisations in the region have followed in MPI's footsteps, launching local peacebuilding institutes either as a direct result of attending or being involved in MPI, and/or based on their own experiences. The Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute is one

particular organisation that has benefited from a form of mentorship from MPI on the technical and administrative side of organising an international training. The capacity to create linkages between diverse organisations and networks is also one of MPI's evident contributions in the region.

In the end, MPI's vision is the creation of a critical mass of peacebuilders that will, in perfect synergy, transform the world into a place that is just, good and peaceful. 

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- 1 See article by Carolyn O. Arguillas (2012, October 16). Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed; New history begins. *MindaNews*.
- 2 John Paul Lederach. Interview by Maria Lucia Zapata-Cancelado, Manila 2006
- 3 Reina Neufeldt. Interview by Maria Lucia Zapata-Cancelado, Manila 2006
- 4 See John Paul Lederach (1996), *Preparing for Peace. Conflict Transformation across Cultures*, First Ed., Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press.
- 5 See John Paul Lederach (2003), *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, for more on theory of change. It is good to note that the Mindanawan perspective on the model includes the spiritual level because of the important role spirituality plays in the perception of conflict and human interaction based in the Filipino culture.
- 6 Selected testimonials from MPI alumni from the years 2005, 2010, and 2011.