

Case Study of Grassroots Peacebuilding

by Nagdilaab Foundation Inc., Basilan, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Since around 1970, Mindanao, the Philippines has been the site of armed conflict between organized groups seeking autonomy and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). While the fighting has decreased since the Government collaborated with these groups to establish an autonomous region in parts of the island, armed conflict is continuing. The violence has not only taken civilian lives, but also forced many residents to leave their homes, disrupted local economy, and most of all, left sadness, anger and distrust between communities.

Behind this armed conflict is a long legacy of injustice in governance and economy against small-scale farmers and fisher folk, women, and indigenous peoples. In particular, one of the main roots of conflict between indigenous peoples (mostly Muslim “Moro”) and newer settlers (mostly Christians) is disputes over land ownership.

The government has tried to end the fighting through military force, with little success. Even in efforts to quell the conflict by promoting development, government programs have often been perceived as no more than charity from Manila, not involving the people. Learning from those past experiences, a different approach was adopted by the NGOs in Mindanao. The NGOs see that to achieve lasting peace, local people must be involved, to put down arms, learn to trust their neighbors, and work together to improve living conditions. In other words, they are promoting grassroots peacebuilding and educating for a culture of peace.

This study reports on the experiences of one such NGO, Nagdilaab Foundation, Inc. (hereafter NFI or Nagdilaab) and its grassroots partners in building peace in its main working area of Basilan, Mindanao. NFI collaborated with a Japanese NGO, the Asian Health Institute (AHI), to document stories of common people in Basilan, to describe NFI's activities have contributed to grassroots peacebuilding, and to inform future peacebuilding efforts.

In the Philippines, many have said nothing good comes out of Basilan. In stark contrast to such negative views, the experiences of the people in this study show how people in Basilan are organizing their communities, building human

and institutional capacity, and empowering themselves for peaceful development.

In the field research, a team of NFI staff members conducted focus group discussions (FGD) and key informants interviews (KII) in two *barangays* (villages, the lowest local government administrative unit in the Philippines), namely Barangay Sta. Clara and Barangay Lumutun, both in Lamitan City, Basilan Province, between July, 2010 and October, 2011. Respondents, formal and informal community leaders were asked to recount their experiences of conflict and grassroots peacebuilding, and the lessons they learned. Relevant experiences from other barangays were also collected.

The study consists of six sections: introduction, background information on the conflict in Basilan, outline of NFI's peacebuilding activities, findings of the field research, discussion, and lessons learned by NFI and the informants, to inform other struggles for grassroots peace.

2. Background

2.1. Overview of Basilan, the Philippines

Basilan is one of the island provinces of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which was created in August, 1989 by Republic Act No. 6734.¹As of 2010, Basilan is composed of two cities and nine municipalities and is a home to about 300,000 inhabitants, mostly from three ethnic groups. The Yakans, considered natives of the island, comprise about 43%, the Taosug (from nearby Sulu) about 25%, and the remaining one third are mostly Catholic migrants from other islands. The majority of the Yakans and the Taosug are Muslim. Main income sources are fishery and agriculture, and the major crops are coconut, rubber, coffee, cassava, banana, and corn. The socio-economic status of people in Basilan is one of the lowest in the Philippines, largely due to the prolonged armed conflicts.

2.2. Background to the Conflict

Mindanao only became a part of the Philippines when the US took over colonial power from Spain at the turn of the 20th century, and the Muslim area was never completely controlled by the Catholic Manila government. Conflict grew in the 1960s when the central government supported migration by Filipino Christians to Mindanao, exacerbating conflicts over land and natural resources

¹After two plebiscites, the ARMM is now composed of six provinces: Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Shariff Kabunsuan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, and two cities: Marawi (in Lanao del Sur) and Lamitan (in Basilan).

(Schiavo-Campo and Judd, 2005).



Figure 1. Map of the Philippines showing Basilan

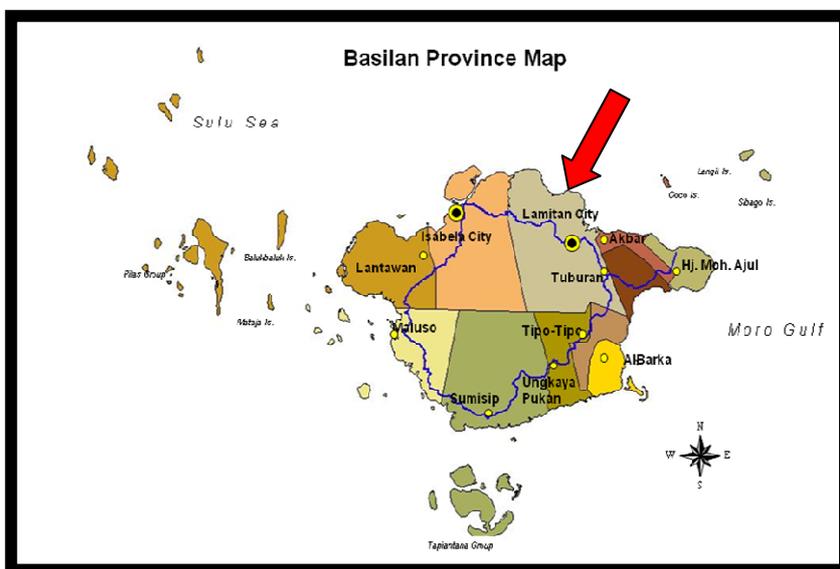


Figure 2. Map of Basilan showing Lamitan City

In the early 1970s, modern Moro (Muslim) armed groups formed to fight for autonomy, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), then the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) a split of MNLF claiming for the independent state from

the Philippines, and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). ASG is based in Basilan, and after the leader was killed, the group became a group of bandit groups, doing kidnapping for ransom. Further, clan conflict (*Rido*) among Muslim groups has been a persistent threat to security in Basilan.

The current social background to conflict in Mindanao is exploitation by wealthy elites and continuing marginalization of poor farmers, fisher folk, and Lumads (indigenous peoples). Despite broad initiatives, the conflict has not been entirely quelled. Some Moro people yearn for more autonomy, and Lumads claim ancestral domains now owned by settlers. Poverty, poor health, and poor security continue to plague the island.

2.3. Past Approaches to Conflict Resolution in Mindanao

The Philippine government's conventional response to armed conflict in Mindanao has been, first, retaliatory force to keep the integrity of the state and second, relief services to the displaced people. The military approach has caused many human rights violations, and the victims are civilians living in the conflict area. Further, conventional efforts to stem conflict by promoting development have treated the people as service recipients rather than empowering them to take active roles and address the root causes of armed conflict.

Moreover, although, the Islamic principles of *misuwara* (consultation) and *ijma* (consensus) play a crucial role in peacebuilding, traditional Muslim methods of conflict resolution have not been sufficient to maintain peace among the various ethnic and religious groups.

3. NFI's Peacebuilding Work

Given the limitations of conventional approaches, NGOs and other institutions working for peace saw the need for holistic people-centered mechanisms for reconciliation. NFI was established in 2003 to improve the capability of communities to be active partners in promoting peace and development in Basilan. Most staff were Catholic workers and lay leaders involved in organizing Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) since the 1980s.

NFI's comprehensive activities include community organization, capability building, micro-finance, literacy training, peace advocacy, and the protection of the environment. It also facilitates inter-religious activities for peace and development., serving Muslim and Christian communities in 45 rural and urban barangays of Basilan.

The foundation's programs are based on three major conceptual frameworks: conflict transformation (grassroots peace education), human security (support for economic security and governance reform), and Bridging Leadership

(training for participatory leadership).

3.1. Collaboration with Partners and Networks for Peace Advocacy

NFI collaborates with various peace advocacy networks in Basilan, Zamboanga area and Mindanao, in particular, Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, Mindanao Week of Peace, Mindanao Peace Weavers, and the Asian Institute of Management, described below.

MINDANAO PEACEBUILDING INSTITUTE: Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI), based in Davao City, offers training to peace builders since 2000. More than 1,200 participants from over 40 countries have joined the course. MPI strategically invites persons from various sectors to promote multi-cultural, multi-sectoral learning. NFI's Executive Director has played a leading role in MPI's development, and in sending participants from various sectors, including a military officer.

MINDANAO WEEK OF PEACE: Mindanao Week of Peace (MWP), started in Zamboanga in 1997, is now a Mindanao-wide celebration, backed up Presidential proclamation 127, enjoining all sectors to celebrate peace. At the local level, NFI acts as convenor to the event. MWP has been organized every year, even in years when severe military conflicts occurred in the area. Activities involve the general public, schools and other institutions. The finale is a peace march. In 2011, approximately 20,000 people joined the march through Zamboanga City.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: NFI facilitates grassroots interfaith dialogue to promote reflection and sharing as a path to peace on personal as well as social levels. In Basilan, to coordinate dialogue, Muslim and Catholic couples formed a volunteer council, which also works on concrete issues, such as preparing end of year gifts to poor families.

MINDANAO PEACE WEAVERS: In May 2003, during the "Peace in MindaNow" Conference, around 300 Mindanao peace advocates representing at least seven peace networks² converged in Davao City and established the Mindanao Peace Weavers (MPW). The group runs joint advocacy campaigns and engages all conflict actors, from the international community to Mindanao's citizens.

PAGTABANGAN BASULTA (PB): MULTI-SECTORAL COLLABORATION ON

²Agong Network, Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society, Inter-Religious Solidarity Movement for Peace, Mindanao Peace Advocates, Mindanao Peoples' Caucus, Mindanao Peoples Peace Movement and the Mindanao Solidarity Network

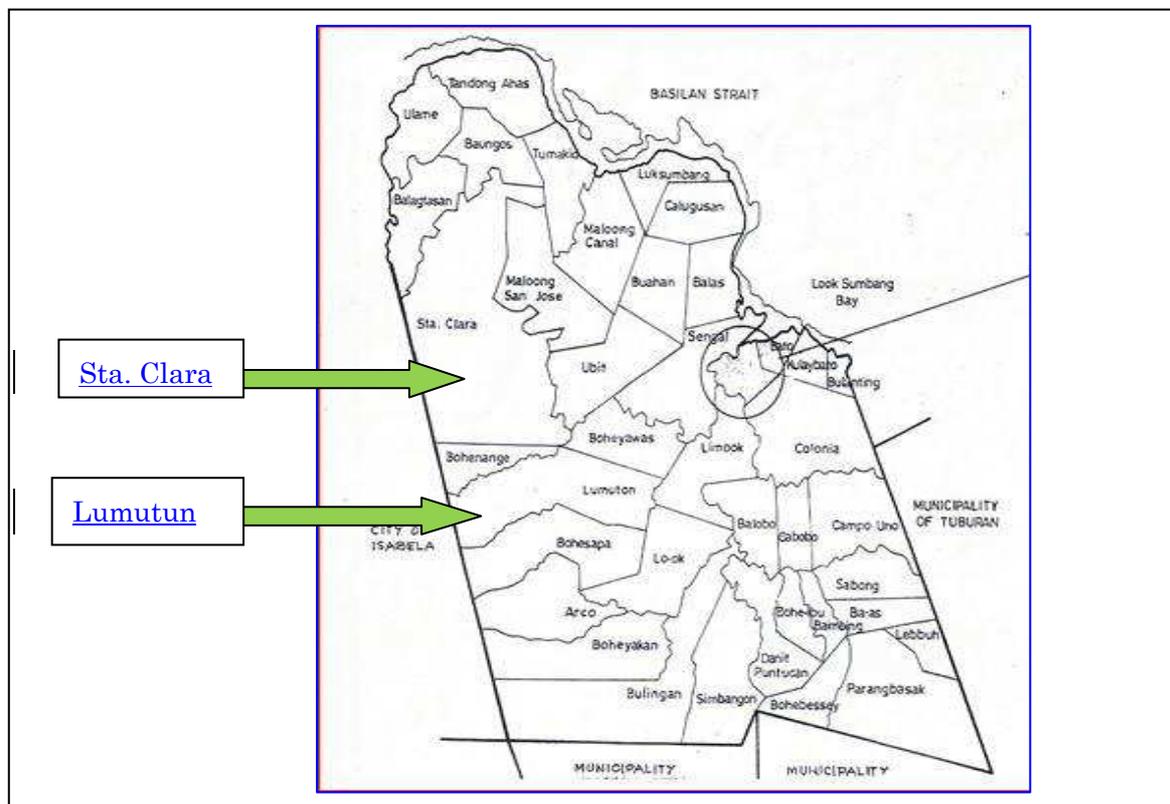
SPECIFIC ISSUES IN BASILAN: PB is a program run in partnership with various NGOs and Asian Institute of Management (AIM) to train top and middle level local leaders in peacebuilding. Under the framework of Bridging Leadership, the program trains leaders to build coalitions and collaborate with multi stakeholders for peace and development.

In 2004 NFI served as the Basilan Secretariat, working with thirteen conveners, all heads of government line agencies, local government, NGOs, religious organizations, military and police commanders, and heads of agrarian reform communities. The program brought stakeholders together around sectoral themes such as health and livelihood. Although NFI is no longer directly involved, experience with PB has strengthened local governance institutions in Basilan.

4. Survey Findings: People Building Peace in Lamitan

4.1. Profile of Lamitan City, Basilan

The original residents of the area were Yakans, and the settlement of Lamitan was established by a Spanish leader in the late 1800s. The city, made up of 45 barangays including Sta. Clara and Lumutun, is predominantly agricultural. Figure 3. Map of Lamitan City



4.2. Sta. Clara

4.2.1. Profile of Sta. Clara Barangay

Sta. Clara, the largest of the barangays in Lamitan with a population of 5328, is an upland area suitable for rubber, coconut, and other staple crops (Executive Legislative Agenda of the City). The area was long owned by the University of the Philippines to finance universities near Manila. As part of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program after the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, the rubber plantation area in Basilan was redistributed to workers and landless farmers who were organized to run cooperatives. In Sta. Clara, this was the Sta. Clara Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Integrated Development Cooperative (SCARBIDC) (SCARBIDC Comprehensive Plan and Barangay Development Plan, 1990). SCARBIDC workers and their families are mostly migrants from the same place in the Visayan Region. Because of their experience in coop management, residents participated actively as NFI partners since the foundation arrived in 2004.

In 2004, conflict issues were characterized as follows: family relations and domestic violence; organizational problems of the SCARBIDC; kidnapping, ambush, landmines, threats from the lawless groups; displacement of families; unstable work and unemployment. To address peace and development, Sta. Clara residents and NFI set up a range of programs and basic services. In particular, women leaders, organized as the Sta. Clara Women's Cooperative, have contributed to grassroots peacebuilding at family and community level. Further, as a participant in PB, SCARBIDC and the barangay as a whole have achieved more collaborative governance.

4.2.2. People Building Peace in Sta. Clara

Nanay (Mother) Sylvia Biton (79), a retired schoolteacher in Sta. Clara, served for many years as a volunteer with NFI and women's organizations. Her main contribution was as a workshop facilitator, educating adults in communication and mediation, as a basis for communal peace. She says, "...In this family life work I have earned the credit of being a peacemaker of families."

Mr. Elvis Tindoc (51) was a Church youth leader for many years, and later served as Chairman of the Board at SCARBIDC from 2003 to 2008, credits his PB training in collaborative leadership with improving management at the cooperative and thus contributing to peaceful development. He states,

"The best gift given by NFI to the cooperative and to Barangay Sta. Clara was the knowledge on Bridging Leadership, which resulted in fast healing

of broken relationships of officers and members that made them work as a team (and) ...resulted in us accessing resources for community and cooperative development.”

In focus group discussions, one woman leader summarized how the community has learned a “culture of peace” through NFI interventions:

“Long ago when we heard that our company guards were slain..., we wanted to retaliate...Over and over, every time there was news like this we were enemies with Muslims here, though they are not the perpetrators. Now, the culture of peace has a big impact on us...Instead of reacting we can find ways to talk ...without condemning our Muslim neighbors”

Another participant reported that although people “have buried the memories of pain, every time we hear about Abusyyaf atrocities, it triggers anger and impatience, especially among men.” Thus, although Sta. Clara residents have found non-violent means to pursue peaceful development at personal and institutional levels, FGD participants called for continued grassroots peace education.

4.3. Lumutun

4.3.1. Profile of Lumutun Barangay

Lumutun, with a total population of 1,189, is mostly an agricultural area. The soil is very fertile and can produce good quality crops as well as raising livestock. Once they enjoyed abundant river fish and shellfish, but these have now vanished due to environmental degradation. The inhabitants have diverse ethnic origins and languages; about 70% are Christian and 30% are Muslim (Yakan and Tausog). Yakan people have lived in the area, and the first record of Christian settlers is from 1954 (Executive Legislative Agenda of the City).

At first, settlers and indigenous peoples lived together in harmony. However, as the number of settlers increased, the Muslims came to resent them, and in 1961 a Christian was hacked to death. This marked the start of the cycle of mistrust and violence between the two communities that has continued on and off until now.

In the 1970s, Lumutun residents evacuated to central Lamitan in fear of military operations, and became dependent on government relief distribution. “We had to evacuate in order not to be caught in crossfire and also to avoid suspicion from the military” one respondent narrates. The situation became increasingly chaotic as farmers, especially Christians, were issued guns for self-defense. Many farmers were killed, and it is still unclear whether the perpetrators were the

government military, Moro armed groups or others. The government deepened ethnic divisions in Lumutun by organizing the Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDF) most of whom were Christians, with a detachment within the barangay. Also, Christian civilians organized a vigilante self-defense group called *Illagas* (means “rats”) so they could farm.

In fear, many Yakan residents fled, leaving the Christians opportunities to squat land the Yakans had tilled for decades without land title. From the late 1970s, many Lumutun people finally decided to return to their homes, and most of them started again from nothing. Then, land conflict again emerged as some Yakans tried to reclaim occupied lands. In 1989, conflict became intense again, and the Barangay Captain called a meeting through the help of community elders, and after a series of dialogues, the dispute was resolved by sharing the land. However, even during these dialogues, in a nearby barangay, the Abussayyaf attacked leaving 10 farmers dead, burning schools and houses, and reigniting mistrust between Muslims and Christians throughout Basilan.

In this area, the main conflict is resource-based, specifically on land ownership, between native Muslim Yakans and Christian settlers, and the slow provision of basic social services has exacerbated conflict. During the research, informants narrated their stories with emotion, as though they happened yesterday. Armed conflict is ongoing; during the field research, a 17 year old youth was kidnapped in the barangay.

4.3.2. People Building Peace in Lumutun

Respondents’ report there were various efforts at grassroots peacebuilding in Lumutun long before NFI came in 2003. The land dispute dialogue noted above is one example. The Catholic church also ran two interfaith peacebuilding programs in the barangay since the early 1980s.

Ruben Panganiban(56), the former barangay captain who led land dispute dialogues in the 1980s, reflected that at the time he lacked both understanding of the conflict and skills for mediation. “With our biases we even complained at first why the church was helping the Muslims, and it is only now I understand it was for peace.”

Ruben witnessed atrocities committed by armed Christians and Muslims, and experienced the pain of having to evacuate Lumutun for five years. He identified both faith-based peace education and community organizing as keys to his efforts to reconcile the two groups.

“I had to double the effort of reaching out to the elders (Yakans), because before the conflict these people had a good relationship with us. My father told me they worked together and were good friends. My formation in the

Basic Christian Community helped me a lot...Community organizing was another precious thing I remember. With the community organizers, there were times that we ate only banana and dried fish with tomatoes, but the work was so fulfilling, and I treasure them in my heart.”

Ruben is no longer the barangay captain of Lumutun, but he still renders his service as an official in some people’s organizations and serves as Justice of the Peace in the Barangay, a nationwide system to conciliate and mediate disputes at the barangay level, as a civilian volunteer to peace. (The current Barangay Captain is Romy, a Yakan, who involved in the inter-religious dialogue and worked for the community as a youth group leader for many years.)

Momoy Cohombo(32), a Yakan, represents the next generation of Lumutun leaders. As a child, he witnessed the gap between Christians and Muslims, and grew up feeling angry and insecure. As a high school student, at times, he wore a *barong* (traditional Moro knife symbolizing leadership), and Christians tagged him as violent. Nevertheless, when the Catholic church organized interfaith activities for Lumutun youth, Momoy joined out of curiosity, and became passionately involved as a Muslim youth leader for peace.

Momoy had the opportunity to participate in various development training courses. In 2003, after serving as a facilitator in adult literacy in Lumutun, he became a regular staff member at NFI. He is proud of his work as a facilitator for the Make a Connection Project, serving 50 out-of-school youths in Sumisip Municipality, a Yakan area very much affected by violence. The main thrust of the project was to nurture the personal and social life of the young people, mainstreaming leadership and preserving the Yakan culture.

While Christian workers sometimes cannot travel in Basilan because of the fragile security, Momoy is trusted by people of any sector and can move around freely, serving as a bridge among people with various backgrounds. Momoy emphasizes,

“My younger days’ experiences nurtured my personal and social life, but I no longer live in the past. I have to see the now and the tomorrow...I need to work and carry peace within me for a better tomorrow.”

5. Discussion

The conflict experiences of Lumutun and Sta. Clara are quite different, because the actual events differed, and because the populations in the two barangays differ in ethnicity, culture, occupation, education and economic status.

The experience of Santa Clara has to do with socioeconomic conflict, the external conflict of continuing threats from lawless groups, and past armed conflict between the MNLF and the Philippine army. In contrast, Lumutun people speak with passion because they have directly experienced the pain of displacements and armed violence, and the terror of seeing soldiers and lawless groups in the vicinity.

Lumutun's experience shows how violence escalates. Elders remember from their youth the good relationships among local ethnic groups. However, armed struggle by the MNLF for Moro rights triggered mistrust among the Christian and Muslim communities. By arming Christian residents, the state added to Moro people's mistrust and hatred of Christians. Resource-based conflict turned into conflict between ethnic groups, and the current generation has grown up in this environment of mistrust.

Nevertheless, in both barangays many individuals are eager to resolve the conflict, and they have contributed to the peace effort in many ways. At all levels, respondents pointed out the importance of building alliances and networks, especially in sectoral organizing. Several respondents identified community organizing as a starting point to allow people to own the problem and help solve it. Respondents also called for continuing efforts at peace education including personal reflection and transformation.

6. Lessons Learned

- (1) Interventions vary according to the community, culture, history and experiences of the people.
- (2) Peace efforts should include education so that people at all levels can understand root causes of conflict, feel as common responsibility, and learn concrete skills to achieve peace.
- (3) Community organizing is a starting point for grassroots people to become actively involved in development and peace.
- (4) Local government unit and other government institutions should be prime actors in promoting transparency, collaboration, and ownership to regain the trust and confidence of the people.
- (5) Multi-stakeholder collaboration and networking are effective at achieving peaceful development, particularly in working on concrete common issues to be solved.
- (6) Proper documentation of events, stories and histories create our identity and aspirations.
- (7) Dismantling the culture of violence and changing into the culture of peace is a long term process, and requires lifetime great commitment of the peacebuilders.

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