

*Policy Studies 17*

# Forging Sustainable Peace in Mindanao: The Role of Civil Society

*Steven Rood*



East-West Center  
Washington

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by Steven Rood

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# List of Acronyms

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<b>ACORD</b>	Alternative Center for Organizational Reforms and Development
<b>ARMM</b>	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
<b>CIDA</b>	Canadian International Development Agency
<b>CODE-NGO</b>	Caucus of Development NGOs
<b>DIMP</b>	Development Innovations Marketplace in the Philippines
<b>DJANGO</b>	development, justice, and advocacy NGO
<b>GAM</b>	Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement)
<b>GRINGO</b>	government run/initiated NGO
<b>GRP</b>	Government of the Republic of the Philippines
<b>IID</b>	Initiatives for International Dialogue
<b>InPeace</b>	Initiatives for Peace in Mindanao
<b>MILF</b>	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
<b>MinCODE</b>	Mindanao Caucus of Development NGO Networks
<b>MNLF</b>	Moro National Liberation Front
<b>MUNGO</b>	mutant NGO
<b>NDF</b>	National Democratic Front

<b>NGO</b>	nongovernmental organization
<b>NPA</b>	New People's Army
<b>NUC</b>	National Unification Commission
<b>PAZ</b>	Peace Advocates Zamboanga
<b>RAM</b>	Reform the Armed Forces Movement
<b>SALAM</b>	Social Amelioration and Literacy Agenda for Muslims
<b>SAMAKANA</b>	Samahan ng Muslim at Kristiyano na Nagkakaisa (Association of Muslims and Christians who are in Unity)
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program

# Executive Summary

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This study investigates the role of civil society in forging sustainable peace in Mindanao. It argues that civil society groups have the potential to make significant contributions to the management of the separatist conflict in the southern Philippines and in forging durable peace. Due to the inherent weakness of civil society groups, however, as well as other local and national conditions, their impact has been indirect, limited, and of little consequence to the macropolitical process. Nevertheless, the role of civil society in peacebuilding is important and should be developed. To this end, the study offers several recommendations to strengthen civil society, especially Muslim civil society, and deepen its interaction with the public at large (especially the Christian population) as well as local and national governments—all with a view to enhancing the key role that civil society groups can play in bringing about a lasting peace in Mindanao.

There is an active peace movement in Mindanao that reflects the general strength of civil society in the Philippines as a whole as well as special efforts made to manage Mindanao conflicts over the years. Beginning in the 1970s under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and continuing to the present day, both Christian and Muslim groups have attempted to build avenues to manage hostilities. This study construes “civil society” to include a wide range of organizations—from development NGOs to church-based groups and business associations. All of these organizational types are in one way or another involved in efforts to manage the conflict

in the southern Philippines. They not only network in various ways among themselves and with organizations in the capital, Manila, but have international linkages. This study describes this welter of entities and relationships. It also points out that Muslim civil society is, for a number of reasons, less developed than its Christian counterpart, leading to some imbalance in peace efforts. Other characteristics of civil society include ideological divisions among the groups, the transitory nature of networks, and the fact that they are overwhelmingly intracommunal, i.e. based either exclusively among Christians or among Muslims. Further, Christian groups active in the peace movement are not representative of the citizenry at large, which supports aggressive moves to achieve “victory” over Muslim insurgents.

In this context, the study argues that civil society in Mindanao can contribute significantly in terms of managing the conflict and ultimately achieving lasting peace in Mindanao. A number of specific peace efforts are described here. Interreligious dialogue was started in the 1970s but accelerated in the 1990s. There is an asymmetry in the dialogue, however, given that Christianity is more organized than Islam and Christians have more distrust to overcome. Even more serious is the limited reach of such efforts at dialogue, even within the Catholic clergy. A second set of peace activities involves civil society helping local communities establish “spaces for peace” where combatants are requested to stay out of a particular locality. Known by several names, these local efforts are motivated by communities who wish to avoid the effects of further conflict. But spaces for peace are limited, too, inasmuch as various parties to conflict do not respect the provisions established by the communities. Finally, civil society has been involved directly in the peace process over the years. Civil society groups helped the new Arroyo government move toward peace in consultations leading up the August 2001 cessation of hostilities with the MILF, for instance. And they helped roll back the level of conflict by agitating for a restoration of the cease-fire in July 2003 after the Arroyo administration’s assault on the MILF’s Buliok complex. Civil society is officially represented on the Local Monitoring Teams established under the Cessation of Hostilities and also has its own parallel cease-fire monitoring process in Bantay Cease-fire (Cease-fire Watch). The latter has been praised by both government and the MILF for providing impartial public analysis of accusations of violations of the terms of the Cessation of Hostilities.

Still, peace has not come to Mindanao and formal peace talks remain suspended. This is not surprising: civil society's role is inevitably secondary to firm government and insurgent commitments to peace. In addition to specific weaknesses, the inherent difficulty of transcending specific interests to embrace a larger political agenda means that civil society's impact on macropolitical processes is limited. Instead, civil society's peace agitation tends to have indirect effects. Civil society can air discussion of the root causes of conflict; it can argue in the media and with policy elites against pursuing "victory" and in favor of developmental changes; and it can provide political space for government officials to maneuver toward a settlement. In short, the nature of civil society affects its impact on conflict management; the involvement of civil society can improve the chances for a lasting peace; but there are inherent limits to the impact that NGOs can have on peace—limitations that can only be overcome by state action.

Despite these limitations and weaknesses, local and international civil society organizations can help bring about lasting peace in the region. To this end, the study makes several recommendations:

- Muslim civil society needs to be strengthened to rectify Muslim/Christian imbalances.
- Civil society networks involved in the peace movement should be strengthened to help transform them from shifting alliances into organizations capable of bringing Muslims and Christians together in a sustained fashion.
- Empirical work on the impact of various approaches (interreligious dialogue, peace zones, effects on citizen attitudes) should be used to help guide conflict management efforts.
- Conflict management must involve local governments—particularly given the decentralized nature of politics and administration in the Philippines.
- Civil society organizations must work with policy elites to reach the public at large, to expose citizens to issues involved in peace talks, and to win the hearts and minds of the Christian populace.



# Forging Sustainable Peace in Mindanao: The Role of Civil Society

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There is no question that the Mindanawon civil society interested in peacebuilding efforts has gone a long way since the Jabidah massacre [of Muslims under the Marcos administration] and the ensuing armed war in Mindanao in the 1970s. . . . By the time armed hostilities erupted during the first quarter of the year 2000, the Mindanawon civil society was in a better position to flex its muscles. Despite the sustained and varied collective actions, still, civil society has not been able to attain the main objective, namely, to end the war and to bring the GRP–MILF Peace Panel back to the negotiating table. Their unsuccessful campaign even led to a sense of battle fatigue in their ranks. [Gaspar et al. 2002: 76–77]

A long time activist in Catholic Church efforts, expressing the reaction of those involved in peacemaking, wrote this shortly after the 2000 hostilities broke out under the administration of President Joseph Estrada. The government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have, since 2000, on occasion gone back to the negotiating table, but also engaged in open armed hostilities. During this period, civil society organizations of many different stripes have engaged in activities related to the conflict in Mindanao, yet no conclusion to the war has been reached. This study examines the efforts of civil society, and their effects.

The conflict in Mindanao is complex, but the focus of this study is on the separatist conflict. Civil society is discussed insofar as it is relevant to resolving the separatist conflict. The fact that there is an active peace

***civil society's involvement in peace efforts is important***

movement justifies an examination of the various facets of civil society—and the plurality discovered helps guard against any overgeneralization about such a loose agglomeration of nongovernment organizations (NGOs). The explicit peace activities of these groups are examined and the effects assessed. Interreligious dialogue, attempts to establish community-level peace zones, and involvement in the formal peace process are all considered. The argument here is that civil society's involvement in peace efforts is important to achieving a lasting settlement—both in terms of addressing underlying causes and in terms of building a constituency for the concessions needed for a peace agreement. There are limitations, however, on how effective civil society can be. These limits are due not only to the particular characteristics of these organizations (such as their ideological divisions or their lack of representativeness of the wider Filipino community) but also to the inherent nature of civil society (above all its inability to aggregate interests to achieve a wider settlement). In the end we see that civil society has had an impact in making it politically possible for policy elites to adopt positions other than “victory” (which seems to be the preferred policy stance of the general Christian Philippine citizenry). Through articulation of issues and networking, through activities parallel to the formal peace process, and through their efforts to bridge communal divides, members of civil society keep alive the prospect for a peace that sometimes seems forever elusive.

That there is an active peace movement in Mindanao may not surprise many observers of the Philippines. The range of members and activities of Philippine civil society is justly famous. All sorts of data of varying quality (from registration records of the Securities and Exchange Commission, accreditation records of local governments, and survey efforts) can be adduced for the number and kind of organizations into which Filipinos group themselves for a variety of purposes. The civil society community is large, highly organized, and politically prominent. Civil society can be defined as a realm of collective public action between the private sphere and the state in which a voluntary, self-generating, and politically active sector of society independent of the state seeks benefits, policy changes, or accountability from the state (Silliman and Noble 1998: 13). This study focuses on the experience of civil society in Mindanao, the second-largest region in the Philippines. It construes “civil society” to include a wide

range of organizations—from development NGOs to church-based groups and business associations. All of these organizations are in one way or another involved in efforts to manage the conflict in the southern Philippines.

There are many facets in the overall situation that make it difficult for any entity to achieve peace in Mindanao: the weakness of the Philippine state, the divide between Muslim and Christian communities, and the regional situation in Southeast Asia. Beginning in the 1970s under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and continuing to the present day, both Christian and Muslim groups have attempted to provide avenues to manage hostilities. A range of development NGOs, church groups, and business associations have worked to mitigate the effects of hostilities and prevent the outbreak of new violence. Activities such as interreligious dialogues, building of ever-shifting coalitions, community organizing, and media advocacy have been increasingly frequent in recent years.

This study argues that civil society in Mindanao can contribute significantly to managing conflict in the region and eventually achieving lasting peace. Civil society groups in Mindanao are generally autonomous in nature, free from government control and military influences, and militant (as shown in various street rallies and caravan marches for peace). Muslims have organized themselves, independent of the rebel forces, and established alliances with groups constituted by Christians. Given the right arena for public and political discourse (vertical involvement with peace talks and horizontal spaces for peace), civil society groups can help the government move toward peace (as in consultations leading up the August 2001 cessation of hostilities with the MILF) or help roll back the level of conflict (as in agitation for a restoration of the cease-fire in July 2003 after the Arroyo administration's assault on the MILF's Buliok complex of camps in Cotabato province). Media coverage of civil society activities has also influenced the decision making of national political elites as they work toward settlements.

Yet there are certain characteristics of the civil society movement that reduce its ability to contribute to peace. The continued disarray among civil society groups—where conflicting peace agendas reflect organizational ideologies, for example—contributes to divisions and ineffectiveness in

*many facets in the overall situation...make it difficult...to achieve peace*

*certain characteristics of civil society...reduce its ability to contribute to peace*

influencing Philippine public opinion. And while Mindanao is well endowed with hyperactive civil society groups, these consist mostly of Christians; Muslims are underrepresented. Such divisions and the complex shifting of structures weaken a civil society faced with many challenging tasks of achieving peace. In addition to specific weaknesses, the inherent difficulty of moving beyond articulating specific interests to aggregating a broad political agenda means that civil society will remain inevitably in a secondary role.

In examining the role of civil society in the peacebuilding efforts, this study maps out the conflict situation and civil society's contributions to the peace process. The study explores Muslim civil society and why it is underrepresented. The argument here is threefold: the nature of civil society affects its impact on conflict management; the involvement of civil society can improve the chances for a lasting peace; but there are inherent limits to the impact that NGOs can have on peace—inherent limitations that require state action to overcome. In the final section, I offer recommendations for local and international civil society that may bring lasting peace in the region a little closer.

### **Conflict in Mindanao**

The conflict situation in Mindanao is quite complex. To understand the effect of civil society's efforts to end the long-running separatist war, we need to sketch this situation. It must be remembered that violent conflict in the southern Philippines is not only of the Muslim/Christian communal or Islamic separatist varieties (though they are the focus of this study). There is banditry (focusing on kidnapping), a communist insurgency, and endemic clan conflict. All three impinge on efforts to resolve the long-running separatist insurgency.

Kidnapping, in fact, plagues many places in the Philippines, and the Filipino-Chinese community is the most frequent target. The phenomenon came to international attention with two kidnappings of foreign tourists—first from the Malaysian island of Sipadan and then from a Filipino resort in the province of Palawan. The notoriety, resources, and reaction these exploits brought to the Abu Sayyaf (including the dispatch of American troops to train Filipinos pursuing the kidnapers) overshadowed a history of kidnapping that has occurred regularly in Mindanao,

often linked to “lost commands” (military or insurgent units no longer under the control of their nominal superiors). Foremost among these is the “Pentagon Gang,” which operates in localities that are also part of the base of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Operations by the Philippine government’s security forces against this gang often endangered cease-fires with the MILF given their forced entry into communities hosting MILF forces. In May 2002, the government and the MILF signed an overall agreement to handle the pursuit of criminal gangs—an agreement that has yet to be fully operationalized. Still, when the leader of the Pentagon Gang, Tahir Alonto, was killed in military operations in August 2004, the operation had been signaled beforehand to the coordinating committees on the cessation of hostilities—and the MILF had interposed no objection (Mindanews: August 14, 2004; August 19, 2004).

The communist New People’s Army (NPA) is active in Mindanao, as it is in many parts of the Philippines, though its areas of operations are more often in Christian or Lumad (indigenous peoples) communities than in areas occupied by Muslims. There are some overlaps—Tulunán, in North Cotabato, for instance, is a peace zone formed after an NPA raid that has also persuaded the MILF not to establish a presence (Rodil 2000: 146–47). The Philippine military on occasion asserts that there are joint operations between the MILF and the NPA (Mindanews: February 9, 2004). The NPA itself refers to an operational agreement with the MILF stipulating they do not operate in each other’s territory (Sindapan 2003). Though the MILF has repeatedly denied any link to “terrorist organizations” (meaning *Jemaah Islamiah* and *al-Qaeda*), it has been quoted as admitting an understanding with the NPA (Villaviray 2003).

Whatever the degree of interaction between the NPA and MILF armed components, the presence of a long-running leftist opposition to the Philippine government has effects on the politics of civil society and conflict management. The National Democratic Front supports the “self-determination of the Bangsamoro People” (Muslims) and their direct involvement in all forms of decision making affecting their interests. (It does not support an independent state for Muslims.) Civil society groups in Mindanao sympathetic to “national democratic” analyses of the Philippines tend to use oppression of the Bangsamoro as one bone of contention with the Philippine government. Government policy, along with military operations and alleged human rights violations in Muslim areas, are subjects for political statements and targets for continued mobilization

by these groups. The issue of political coloring of civil society activities recurs throughout this study.

***Feuds between families often lead to tit-for-tat retaliation***

Another widespread form of conflict is intracommunity clan conflict. Again not unknown in other parts of the Philippines, this phenomenon remains important as the Philippine government has not been able to enforce laws and maintain order. Thus civilians take disputes into their own hands. Feuds between families often lead to tit-for-tat retaliation organized along family lines. In a survey undertaken in late 2002 that included ARMM and adjacent areas, respondents were asked whether there were violent incidents in their communities—and if so to describe the nature of those incidents.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1. Types of Conflict in Muslim Mindanao and Adjacent Areas**

Parties to the Conflict	% of Respondents
Among families/clans/tribes	43
Between Muslims and Christians or between military and MILF/MNLF/Abu Sayyaf	38
Between farmers and landowners or between laborers and employers	15

As shown in Table 1, respondents report more incidents related to family or clan conflict than Muslim separatism. To complicate matters, endemic clan conflict sometimes triggers ethnic conflict and even military confrontation. What begins as a dispute between families can end with organized armed forces clashing as parties to the dispute persuade others to become involved—or the Philippine military may mistake a clan clash for a separatist operation and intervene on its own. Consequently, community-level peacemaking must address clan conflict along with ethnic violence. One of the most famous examples of community peacemaking, in the *barangay* of Maladeg, Sultan Gumander, Lanao del Sur, has expended since the late 1990s at least as much energy

on *rido* (clan conflict) as on Muslim/Christian animosities.

Even with these caveats, the fact remains that conflicts due to Muslim separatism form the main challenge to peace and development in Mindanao. There is no evidence, for example, that clan or family conflict was any less prevalent in the past than it is now—yet times of relative peace on the separatist (or communal) front have yielded economic growth in Mindanao. The communist armed threat is not insignificant, but the Muslim threat is geographically concentrated and thus has a greater impact on the areas of central and western Mindanao than does the NPA threat elsewhere in the country.

***Muslim separatism  
form[s] the main  
challenge to peace and  
development***

Further, there is the regional dimension. Muslim grievances resonate across Southeast Asia in a way that communist-inspired insurgencies no longer do (International Crisis Group 2003; 2004). Thus the question of how to manage the conflict caused by the intersection of a Muslim minority and a largely Christian Philippine state has implications for conflict elsewhere in Asia (for example, minority Muslims in southern Thailand in conflict with their largely Buddhist state).

### **Civil Society in Mindanao**

Civil society groups felt somewhat optimistic after the January 2001 accession to office of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (after the abrupt downfall of President Joseph Estrada). At the initiative of Kusog Mindanaw (Mindanao Force)—an umbrella organization that has an NGO as its secretariat but includes business through the Mindanao Business Council and elected public officials through the Confederation of Mindanao Governors and City Mayors—a meeting was held in November 2000 with Macapagal-Arroyo (then vice-president) to transmit the consensus of a Kusog Mindanaw roundtable on how to promote peace in the region. One suggestion was the naming of an all-Mindanao peace panel for talks with the MILF. In February 2001, President Macapagal-Arroyo did just that by naming an all-Mindanao panel with a civilian (presidential assistant for Mindanao Jesus Dureza) as head. This peace panel and the government in general were instructed to pursue an “all-out peace” policy—in contrast to the “all-out war” policy of President Estrada.

More than three years later, hopes have not been fulfilled. Though a cessation of hostilities was agreed upon in August 2001 between the gov-

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been fulfilled***

ernment and the MILF, formal peace talks were suspended in March 2002. An upsurge in violence during the first half of 2003—including bombings of civilian targets, government military action against the Buliok complex in Pikit, Cotabato province, and retaliatory military action by the MILF—was only brought under partial control in July 2003 with another cease-fire agreement. Even though both local and international monitoring teams have been fielded to strengthen the cease-fire—and despite repeated announcements of impending resumption of peace talks—by late 2004 no more peace talks had been held.

In the midst of all this, civil society has still not been able to attain the main objective referred to by Gaspar et al.: “to end the war and bring the GRP–MILF Peace Panel back to the negotiating table.” In fact, some of the divisions in civil society have been impossible to paper over—as evidenced by two simultaneous peace conferences being held in different Mindanao cities, Cagayan de Oro and Davao, in May 2003.<sup>2</sup> Both conferences called for the resumption of peace talks with the MILF (and the National Democratic Front, the political arm of the communist insurgency). The Cagayan de Oro conference was convened by Initiatives for Peace in Mindanao (InPeace Mindanao), which brings together some of the more militant leftist groups and some Protestant church leaders. It announced the creation of an Independent Fact Finding Mission to determine the truth behind “mystery” bombings in Mindanao and issued a call: “No to Martial Law.” On the other side of the island, the Davao conference brought together many networks of mainstream civil society and the Catholic Church’s peace activists. The conference supported calls by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines for a cease-fire and the Bishops-Ulama Conference for active third-party mediation while urging local networks and international partners to press both the government and the MILF to enter into dialogue.

These two simultaneous conferences reflect a major, enduring split between civil society organizations. One indicator of the frenzy of civil society efforts at conflict management is that the organizers of these conferences showed virtually no awareness of the existence of each other; nor was there any sign of unity in favor of similar peace-related themes. This is not due to accidents of miscommunication. It is a reflection of deep ideological and organizational divisions. These divisions not only render civil

society less effective in influencing Philippine public opinion but also reduce the ability to attain the one goal on which all civil society elements agree: lasting peace in Mindanao.

*Development NGOs*

The largest organization of civil society in the Philippines is the Caucus of Development NGOs (CODE-NGO), the “network of networks.” A visit to a CODE-NGO convention can convince one of the political potency of the sector and (within the sector) the vibrancy and number of representatives from Mindanao. The regional equivalent, the Mindanao Caucus of Development NGO Networks (MinCODE), is well established and its 500 member organizations run programs across the island.

A snapshot of the sector’s vigor can be derived from an initiative of the World Bank’s Philippine office (in collaboration with many other donors): Panibagong Paraan, the Development Innovations Marketplace in the Philippines (DIMP). When the World Bank held this competition for civil society organizations—where the prize is a grant to undertake a one-year innovative project—almost 1,800 entries were received, higher than in any country in which the contest had been previously held. In late 2003, advertisements were published and notices circulated nationally soliciting DIMP proposals from civil society organizations. The primary criteria for judging proposals were to be innovation and replicability. The response was enthusiastic.

**Table 2. Geographic Spread of Applicants for the DIMP Grant**

Location	% of Philippine Population	% of DIMP Concept Papers
National Capital Region	15	37
Luzon (outside of National Capital Region)	42	27
Visayas	20	16
Mindanao	23	20

Table 2 shows that the national capital region is overrepresented, the rest of Luzon is underrepresented, and both the Visayas and Mindanao (despite being poorer regions) have NGOs roughly proportional to their population. Within Mindanao, however, there are striking disparities, which are revealed in the membership lists for MinCODE (categorized geographically in Table 3). It is notable that the regions with the highest

*civil society in the  
Muslim areas...is less  
developed*

Muslim populations (ARMM and Region 12) have relatively small numbers of NGOs participating in MinCODE. Clearly, then, civil society in the Muslim areas takes a different form or is less developed than in other areas of

Mindanao—or both. We will return to the topic of Moro civil society after a general look at Mindanao civil society. In any case, we have a civil society movement centered in Christian-dominated areas (Regions 10 and 11) trying to understand root causes of Muslim grievances and urging the settlement of the armed conflict. There are Muslim organizations, many of them discussed later, but they are outnumbered by organizations made up of Christians.

**Table 3. Geographic Spread of Mindanao NGOs**

Location	MinCODE Members
Region 9 (Zamboanga peninsula)	65
Region 10 (northern Mindanao)	189
Region 11 (Davao area)	180
Region 12 (western Mindanao)	38
Region 13 (Caraga)	47
ARMM (including Cotabato City)	20

Many participants in MinCODE are cooperatives focusing mainly on improving the economic well-being of their members. While this could be said to contribute to peace by improving people's lives—and their activities may well build social trust in and between communities—

typically their activities are not focused on improving the prospects for lasting peace. At the other end of the spectrum are organizations that devote considerable attention to building peace:

- Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) in Davao City—an organization that nurtures international links to others concerned with Mindanao issues (and also maintains links on the issues of East Timor and Burma). IID has been instrumental in forming and nurturing the Mindanao Peoples' Caucus, which engages directly in such conflict management activities as monitoring the cease-fire (Bantay Cease-fire) and observing peace talks in Malaysia.
- Pakigdait, Inc., in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte—a mixed Christian-Muslim organization formed in the heat of the “all-out war” in 2000. It engages in interfaith dialogue and conflict management activities, as well as community development.
- Kadtuntaya Foundation, Inc., in Cotabato City—which undertakes a wide spectrum of relief and rehabilitation, community development, workshops on Islamic governance, and conflict management activities. It is also the secretariat of the Bangsamoro Consortium of Civil Society, which brings together over 40 Muslim civil society organizations from ARMM and western Mindanao.
- Mindanao Commission on Women—an NGO created in late 2001 by 23 Christian and Muslim women leaders from all over Mindanao. It includes “peace and multiculturalism” as a program area, along with “politics and governance” and “poverty reduction.” In May and June 2003, the commission spearheaded the Mothers for Peace Campaign, which started in the area of the Buliok complex and went on a road show in Luzon and Visayas, attracting considerable media attention.

### *Religious Organizations*

Activism in the Catholic Church has a history in the Philippines stretching back into the martial law years (1972–86). Much current activity related to peace and conflict management is funded by an international NGO, Catholic Relief Services, which has a wide range of partners in Mindanao (Neufeldt et al. 2000):

- Explicitly church-based groups—including the Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue (Davao), the Immaculate Conception Parish of Pikit, the Diocese of Kidapawan, and the

Prelature of Ipil.

- Organizations associated with the Catholic Church—such as the Reconciliation Center in Cotabato City, the Notre Dame University Peace Center, and the Nagdilaab Foundation in Basilan.
- Muslim or Lumad (indigenous peoples) organizations that receive funding from Catholic Relief Services—such as the Kadtuntaya Foundation in Cotabato City, the Maal Jamaah Foundation in Davao, and the Peksalabukan Bansa Subanen (a federation of Subanen organizations on the Zamboanga peninsula).

Another prominent Catholic-related civil society organization working to manage conflict is Peace Advocates Zamboanga (PAZ) in Zamboanga City. In 1999, PAZ initiated the annual Week of Peace in Zamboanga City, an activity that has spread to other cities, particularly Davao.

Non-Catholic Church activity is less widespread, given the predominance of Catholics among Christians, but is still quite visible. The United Church of Christ in the Philippines, the Episcopal Church, and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente have all lent the prestige of their hierarchy to peace initiatives—including the May 2003 InPeace Mindanao event in Cagayan de Oro. The National Council of Churches of the Philippines joins Catholic bishops and Muslim ulama in the Bishops-Ulama Conference. The Mennonite Central Committee partners with Catholic Relief Services in Mindanao, and their “peace methodologies” are widely admired.

Muslim organizations are less prominent in these peacebuilding efforts. The best-known is the Ulama League of the Philippines, which has its center of gravity in Maranao ethnic areas but has chapters elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> This group forms one of the pillars of the Bishops-Ulama Conference. An organization in Zamboanga is the Social Amelioration and Literacy Agenda for Muslims (SALAM), which is sometimes overshadowed by its partner PAZ but is active in local discussions of Islamic dimensions of governance and peace.

#### *Business Associations*

While business associations are often not included in “civil society” because of their links to the profit-oriented private sector, their exclusion would miss important facets of the situation in Mindanao. Although business associations have been set up to provide benefits for their members,

in the conflict context of Mindanao they explicitly attempt to build better relations among communities and remedy economic inequalities among localities.

The Mindanao Business Council (based in Davao), which purports to speak for the private sector in the whole of Mindanao, holds annual Mindanao Business Congresses where specific policy concerns are distilled in consultations and studies and brought to the attention of national government cabinet members and the president of the Philippines. These concerns inevitably touch on conflict in Mindanao. Beginning with the “all-out war” in 2000, the Mindanao Business Council has tried to publicize the cost of the conflict as part of its ongoing peace advocacy (Mindanao Business Council 2003a). This advocacy includes issuing statements in favor of peace talks (even after airport bombings in Davao City that were initially blamed on the MILF) and participating in Peace Week (Mindanao Business Council 2003b).

Some time ago, it was realized that vigorous business-led economic growth might unduly favor those areas free of conflict, as investors went mostly to safe havens. Mindanao leaders, both Muslim and Christian, have thus been emphasizing the role of the Muslim private sector. The ARMM Business Council (based in Cotabato City) works with local chambers of commerce throughout the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao—both on business concerns in their communities and on general issues of peace and development. The Muslim Business Forum (headquartered in General Santos City) has been actively working in such areas as halal food certification and Islamic banking. These efforts link with the Mindanao Business Council, and all try to address the roots of the conflict by building interethnic linkages and improving economic conditions in conflict-affected areas as well as improving the general climate for business (Nelson 2000; Concepcion et al. 2003; Gancho and Samaco 2004).

#### *Political NGOs*

Organizations associated with individuals and parties that seek political power (whether through electoral politics or other means) are in a borderline category of civil society. But so long as the organizations themselves do not directly compete for political power, classifying them as part of civil society is legitimate. NGO activists have long made fun of organizations linked to mainstream politicians and government officials, using names like “MUNGOs” (mutant NGOs) and GRINGOs (government run/ini-

tiated NGOs). DJANGOs (development, justice, and advocacy NGOs) are treated by Filipino analysts more gently, however, even though they are “directly or indirectly influenced” by ideological forces (Constantino-David 1997; see also Guiam 2003).

Given the maelstrom of political controversy that is Mindanao, it is important to recognize that some organizations are sympathetic to different ideological groupings of the left or to the separatists. The noncommunist left party, Akbayan, has affiliate organizations doing community organizing and developmental work, such as the Institute for Strategic Initiatives in Cotabato City or Alternative Center for Organizational Reforms and Development in Zamboanga City. The militant left parties such as Bayan Muna have their NGO equivalent in Bayan. The head of the Bangsamoro Women’s Foundation in Cotabato City sits on the MNLF executive council. The executive director of the Institute for Bangsamoro Studies, also in Cotabato City, has published a book on the political thought of Hashim Salamat. All these organizations advocate peace and undertake conferences, workshops, or publications aimed at promoting peaceful resolution of Mindanao’s problems.

Given the conflicting political visions involved, unity in the peace movement is difficult. Different movements have different goals: Akbayan believes in reform of the current system, Bayan Muna advocates complete

***conflicting political  
visions [make] unity  
in the peace movement  
difficult***

replacement of the current capitalist system, the MNLF aims for an ethnonationalist solution to Muslim problems, while the MILF seeks an Islamic solution. Naturally, NGOs sympathetic to these varying goals will have varying reasons for cooperating with or criticizing the government (and each other). In addition, all can elicit

the hostility of security forces because they are outside the mainstream of traditional Philippine politics. These divisions, as well as separation from “normal” politics, make it even harder to influence government policy.

#### *Beyond Mindanao*

Apart from groups in Mindanao, there are groups and networks based in Manila and abroad that have an active presence in Mindanao and contribute to managing the conflict. Philippine Business for Social Progress has a Mindanao Peace and Development Program and works to bring the business sector more directly into conflict management. Tabang

Mindanao, begun as a relief and rehabilitation effort during the 1998 drought, has become a much more generalized advocate of peace and development in Mindanao.<sup>4</sup> It serves as a communication node; its advocacy includes raising funds for Mindanawans and making the case for peace talks; and it supports community-based efforts. Balay, Inc., offers psychosocial rehabilitation to internally displaced persons and maintains an office in Cotabato City with extensive operations in Pikit, Cotabato province, where fighting has raged repeatedly since 1997.

A more specialized conflict management institution is the Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute. For more than a decade, the institute has supported efforts at negotiation, networking, and conflict management. In December 2002 and again in December 2003, it held “Waging Peace” workshops that brought together Filipinos and foreigners to discuss both the NDF/NPA peace process and the Mindanao peace process (Garcia et al. 2003). The workshop participants were able to engage Philippine government officials—including peace negotiators and the military—in an effort to bolster negotiations.

An organization that combines conflict management with community organizing is CO-Multiversity. Although it works with communities throughout the Philippines, for a number of years it has had a specialized program in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. Providing technical assistance in community organizing and conflict management, CO-Multiversity’s Mindanao component has helped communities in Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat deal with the aftermath of conflict.

Many international NGOs are interested in the conflict in Mindanao. Catholic Relief Services and its support to organizations have already been mentioned. Publications of Conciliation Resources in London provide a forum for international discussion of Mindanao’s problems, as well as reflective pieces on the nature of conflict management (ACCORD 2003). International Alert has teamed up with Philippine Business for Social Progress to work on the private sector’s role in conflict management and has linked with the Alternative Forum for Research in Mindanao for an analytical piece (Concepcion et al. 2003). The Asia Foundation works with academic institutions and NGOs throughout Mindanao, with particular emphasis on areas affected by the separatist conflict. In August 2003 it convened, with assistance from the Consensus Building Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a small discussion group of those knowledgeable on the conflict in Mindanao. The group not only developed a

phased strategy to guide the peace process but also listed a range of options for a political resolution for southern Mindanao: full implementation of the 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF; constitutional change to allow an Islamic autonomous region; federalism; and independence (The Asia Foundation 2003).

Geneva Call, from Switzerland, has had a particular impact through its engagement with “nonstate actors” (rebel groups that do not accept the legitimacy of the central government but do not enjoy international legitimacy) throughout the world in the campaign against landmines. In April 2002, a mission of three Filipinos and three non-Filipinos met with officials of the MILF who signed a “Deed of Commitment Under Geneva Call for Adherence to a Total Ban on Antipersonnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action” (Geneva Call 2002).

#### *Networking in Mindanao*

Operating in Mindanao are any number of networks, two of which have already been noted: the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (with Kadtuntaya as the secretariat) and the Mindanao Caucus of Development NGO Networks (MinCODE), which brings together eight civil society networks with hundreds of members. A broader grouping, which often attempts to speak for Mindanao as a whole, is Kusog Mindanaw, which brings together MinCODE and the Mindanao Business Council, the Confederation of Mindanao Governors and City Mayors, and the Mindanao Lawmakers Association. While Kusog Mindanaw’s “trisectoral” collaboration (civil society, business, and government) provides considerable political clout from time to time, both the form and substance of Kusog Mindanaw are dominated by NGOs. There are long discussions where more than half the participants are from civil society, and politicians who disagree with Kusog’s positions (in favor of peace talks, for instance) ignore it as inconvenient (though politicians are perfectly willing to use Kusog to lobby for larger budgetary allocations).

Others with less definite membership (because of overlapping and shifting) are specialized peace groups with names like Mindanao Peace Advocates Conference, Mindanao Peoples’ Caucus, Mindanao Peoples’ Peace Movement, Agong Network, Mindanao Solidarity Network, and Panagtagbo-Mindanao. These groupings bring together personalities and organizations that have already been mentioned—MinCODE, Peace Advocates Zamboanga, Initiatives for International Dialogue, Kadtuntaya—

for activities such as the May 2003 conference in Davao City. Similarly, InPeace and its activities (like the May 2003 conference in Cagayan de Oro) call on Bayan and the human rights NGO Karapatan (militant NGOs associated with the left) and their partners. Throughout 2003 they conducted follow-up events to the Cagayan de Oro conference (for example, in Zamboanga City and Cotabato City).

An interesting network that flourished and then faded is Kalinaw Mindanaw (Mindanao Peace), which has been cited repeatedly in the literature as being founded in July 1996 and offering hope and civil society support for the peace agreement with the MNLF (Kamlan 2004; Evangelista 2003; Rodil 2000). This grouping, however, now seems moribund—its website ([www.mindanao.com/kalinaw/](http://www.mindanao.com/kalinaw/)) was last updated in June 2002 and Kalinaw Mindanaw is not cited in 2003 after the military's offensives in Buliok. As so often has happened, organizational convenience seems to have dictated another mechanism (the May 2003 peace conferences) and new groups have sprung up. Those who organized the May 2003 Davao City conference have now agreed to a new organizational name: Peaceweavers. The formal launch of the new grouping was held on October 4, 2004, in Cotabato City. Described as a “convergence of networks of peace advocates,” at that meeting they issued a statement calling for the resumption of peace talks between the MILF and the government.

As if to emphasize the continuing ideological differences between networks, in November 2004 InPeace vowed to “stand in solidarity with the global campaign against U.S. interest in Mindanao.” In a conference, the participants pledged to address the Mindanao situation by organizing an international campaign for the permanent removal of U.S. troops. There was no reported mention of the peace talks between the government and the MILF (Mindanews: December 4, 2004).

### *Muslim Civil Society*

The data in Table 3 about the geographic distribution of NGOs within Mindanao point to less density in Muslim-dominated areas. There are a number of possible reasons for this. One explanation might be sheer poverty. Rufa Cagoco Guiam (2003) uses frameworks developed for Philippine civil society at large to describe civil society in ARMM, which implies that civil society takes the same form as elsewhere in the Philippines but is merely less developed in Muslim areas. Given that NGO activists are largely drawn from the middle class and that Muslim areas are

the poorest in the Philippines, it should come as no surprise that it is these areas that have a less developed civil society.

But the widely cited lack of separation of church and state in Islam could indeed have implications for the prospects of nonreligious groupings among Muslims. It is worth noting that Guiam (2003) classifies “Daw’wah” or proselytizing groups as civil society organizations, indicat-

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ing a different dividing line than in Christian societies (where religious orders themselves are typically not considered “civil society”). Another facet of this “lack of ideological space” for civil society would be the presence of armed ideological groups—the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front—that

claim to speak for the grievances of Muslims. To the extent that a shared identity as Muslims is strong (as the data indicate), then religion and armed struggle may fulfill the need for collective public action between the private sphere and the state in place of civil society organizations.

A third reason for the weakness of civil society in Muslim areas might be discrimination, oppression, and marginalization. In the context of an armed insurgency, it is quite difficult for aboveground organizations to articulate grievances in ways that might resemble the rhetoric of underground organizations. Security organizations of the government, both police and armed forces, may well hamper their activities. Or, more benignly, the hegemony of the mainstream Christian society may shoulder aside Muslim organizations. Many of the strongest “civil society” organizations in the area, the ones that get grants from donors and visits from dignitaries, are in fact Christian (often connected to the system of Notre Dame schools run by the Oblates). These organizations have track records, accounting systems, and fund-raising skills. Most of them also have laudable motives. But, in the end, when an organization based in a Christian school gets funds for working with Muslims (on, say, madrasa curriculum), it means that a Muslim organization is not getting that funding.

A final note on Moro civil society: there are certain developments that respond to increasing globalization in general and the post-September 11 war on terrorism in particular. An organization that spans both Mindanao and Manila is the Young Moro Professionals. Well educated—often doctors, lawyers, journalists, or others with advanced degrees—this younger generation is qualified to compete in a globalized economy but also feels

compelled to speak out on issues concerning Muslims in the Philippines. Another new organization, also connecting Mindanao and Manila to the rest of the world, is the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy. This group explicitly takes on the question of the connection between Islam and democracy so that the discourse is not dominated by the West. This organization tries to publicize “liberal Islam” as a valid interpretation and way forward for Philippine Muslims.

### *Representativeness*

In this brief survey of civil society one aspect has remained unexplored. This is the fact that the Christian or settler communities that oppose accommodation of Muslim aspirations are not well represented in civil society. In this sense, organized civil society is, in various ways, part of the peace movement—or at least (for instance, in the case of networks of cooperatives) not opposed to the peace process. Yet there is considerable opposition from average citizens to concessions in peace agreements—witness the uproar in Christian areas and the Philippine media after the 1996 final peace agreement with the MNLF. In fact, the ecological niche of organizing, expressing, and furthering opposition to peace accords is well filled already with elected politicians, particularly in the areas near the ARMM—Sarangani, Cotabato, and South Cotabato provinces, for example, or the Zamboanga peninsula (including Zamboanga City).

Civil society activities seem to have had little effect on general public opinion, and a divide exists between elected officials who represent this opposition and NGOs who strive for peace. On the question of American troop participation in the Balikatan military exercises in Basilan aimed at suppression of the Abu Sayyaf, for example, civil society organizations were virtually unanimously against it, while general public opinion was strongly in favor.<sup>5</sup> In a Social Weather Stations survey in March 2002, 75 percent of Filipinos approved of U.S. troops going to combat zones like Basilan and 60 percent said that U.S. soldiers should stay in such areas as long as needed (Social Weather Stations Media 2002).

This general question of how closely civil society reflects general public opinion applies not only to the Christian civil society but to Muslim NGO activists as well. Moro civil society organizations tend to take the

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public opinion***

possibility of independence from the Philippines very seriously—much more seriously than one might expect given the determination of the government to maintain the territorial integrity of the Philippines. They tend to espouse independence more than the general Muslim populace does. A recent discussion seemed to take striving for independence for granted. People differed only on whether it was an “option” or “goal,” on its coverage, and whether a referendum was the best means to achieve it (Mindanews: February 16, 2004).

But we can see from Table 4, drawn from a 2002 survey, that explicit support for secession from the Philippines only elicits the approval of about one-sixth of ARMM citizens. These opinion poll data reflect, for both Christian and Muslim issues, a divide between activist and mass opinion—and this divide has considerable consequences for conflict management efforts. Muslim civil society is inclined to take political positions that the government finds beyond the pale and thus is less likely to be seen as a legitimate interlocutor in conflict management. More important for conflict management is the divide between Christian civil society and ordinary citizens, since this gap is ably filled by elected politicians. Whatever the persuasive power of civil society arguments for peace (such as the cost of war), there are strategically placed officials who not only reject concessions but find that arguing against peace settlements can win votes.

**Table 4. Opinion on Options for the ARMM**

*Question:*

There is a Republic Act 6734, which created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or ARMM in 1989. At present, this consists of five provinces (Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi) and a city (Marawi City). Until now, discussions and debates continue as to what is best for this region. Which do you think is best for the region?

*Responses:*

Islamic laws to be implemented in an autonomous region	41%
Revert to the old system without autonomy	23%
Secession from the Philippines	16%
Continue the current autonomous system	9%
Autonomous provinces under this region	6%

## Civil Society's Peace Activities

In this section we will examine the three major areas of civil society activity: promotion of interreligious dialogue, creation of local “spaces for peace” (communities where armed elements from all sides are urged to stay out), and involvement of civil society in the macro (Track 1) peace process. These categories are derived from the way Mindanao civil society activists describe their practice. They do not come, for instance, from an analytical exercise (as in Anderson and Olson 2003). The intent here is to reflect the self-perceptions of the activists themselves and to explore the effectiveness of their activities.

### *Dialogue Between Communities*

A common label for the Philippines, naturally objected to by Muslims, calls it the “Only Christian Country in Asia” (sometimes specified as the only Catholic country in Asia).<sup>6</sup> This, of course, points out the central dilemma of Muslims living in the Philippines: if this is true, how can Muslims be said to be Filipinos? It was only in 2002 that, for the first time, a Muslim holiday, Eid il-Fitre, was declared for the country as a whole (instead of being confined to Muslim regions) whereas Christian holy days (Christmas, Holy Week) have always been national holidays.

In this context—and in response to the bloodshed of the 1970s—some Christians began to evolve a response: interreligious dialogue (Kamlan 2004). In 1977 an NGO affiliated with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (a Protestant group) began a Duyog Ramadan (Accompany Ramadan) program aimed at improving Christian understanding of Muslims. This initiative also included Catholics, but it died out in the 1980s amid internal differences over emphasis (“liberation” versus “Christian understanding of Muslims”) (LaRousse 2001). More long-lasting has been the Sisilah (Chain) Peace Dialogue, started in Zamboanga City in May 1984 and continuing to this day. It is best known for its annual summer course on Muslim-Christian dialogue.

But it was a change in government policy in the early 1990s that really accelerated the Catholic Church's involvement in interreligious dialogue. In the words of William LaRousse (2001: 407): “A real turning point in Church consciousness was brought about, not by the Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue [established in 1990] itself alone, or any specific Church action, but it was the creation of the National Unification Commission (NUC) in 1992.” This boost by the government

was an unintended consequence of systematic grassroots consultation undertaken by the administration of Fidel Ramos (Ferrer 2002). A long series of workshops and meetings was held to arrive at positions in all peace negotiations—with the National Democratic Front, the Moro National Liberation Front, and the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM). In the end, settlements were arrived at for the latter two groups (and progress was made with the National Democratic Front)—but the main impact of the bottom-up process was to accelerate the Catholic Church's intercommunity dialogue efforts by encouraging Christians and Muslims to talk in the National Unification Commission's workshops.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference, by contrast, has been deliberately supported from the beginning in July 1996 (at the end of negotiations with the MNLF) by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process. The fact that the Bishops-Ulama Forum is supported by the government, as well as Catholic Church sources, leads to obvious questions about its ability to enter into impartial dialogue with the Muslim community. Other critics note that it is of limited reach—on the one hand, the Muslim component, the Ulama League of the Philippines, does not speak for all *ulama*; on the other hand, the Catholic bishops have difficulty reaching the wider community of Catholics. In a Davao City function of the Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue, it was noticed that all priests attending were from religious orders (Jesuits, Oblates, and the like) while none were from the more numerous secular or diocesan priests. Diocesan priests, rooted in localities and often echoing the prejudices of their parishioners, are less comfortable with efforts to bridge communal divides.

There is an inevitable degree of asymmetry in interreligious dialogue. Islam has no hierarchy, whereas the Catholic Church is very bureaucratic. (Protestant churches lie somewhere in between.) Muslims are immersed in the predominantly Christian culture of the Philippines, while Christians have essentially ignored Muslim culture. And, it must be said, the distrust that Christians feel for Muslims is greater than Muslim distrust of Christians. In the survey mentioned previously (Table 1), respondents were asked their degree of trust of various communities. The results are shown in Table 5. Muslim attitudes toward Christians are more trusting than Christian attitudes toward Muslim ethnic groups—perhaps reflecting the fact that virtually all Muslims have had interactions with the majority Christians, while many Christians have had little interaction

**Table 5. Trust Across Communities**

Muslim Net Trust Rating of Christians	Non-Muslim Net Trust Rating of Muslim Ethnic Groups	
+34	Maranao	-13
	Tausug	-21
	Maguindanaon	-27

*Note:* Net Trust Rating: percentage of respondents who express “very much” or “much” trust minus the percentage of respondents who express “little” or “very little” trust.

with the minority Muslims.

Thus the task of overcoming mutual mistrust lies largely on the Christian side of any divide. To the extent that one hopes to change attitudes, it is Christian attitudes that must change (LaRousse 2001: 418–20). Although it is natural that the initiative in this work lies on the Christian side, it is dismaying that the reach of interreligious dialogue is so limited. Of course, the entire discourse of interreligious dialogue assumes that the issues are framed in terms of contradiction between two communities religiously defined. Not all framings of conflict in Mindanao would agree with this premise. The MNLF has always been predominantly an ethnonationalist movement representing the Moro people with little emphasis on religion per se. Since 1996, for instance, despite the power of the ARMM (under MNLF governors) to amend or expand the Marcos-era Code of Muslim Personal Law, the topic has not been tackled. A secular emphasis on autonomy, development, and political equality marks this version of the peace process.

*the task of overcoming  
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largely on the  
Christian side*

Still, the conventional characterization of the conflict pits Christians versus Muslims. Unfortunately, as noted, there is little evidence that interreligious dialogue is having much effect on public opinion—even within the ranks of religious leaders it is not very widespread. Although there is talk of interreligious harmony, the overall situation remains one of considerable distrust, particularly distrust of Muslims by ordinary Christians.

*Horizontal Spaces for Peace*

One of the often-cited characteristics of Philippine conflict management is the attempt to carve out areas where local communities have persuaded armed elements, rebel or government, to stay out. Sometimes called “horizontal” peacemaking, such activities sprang up in the late 1980s in response to the communist insurgency and government counterinsurgency activities. With the lack of progress on peace talks with the NPA, peace activists in locations ranging from northern Luzon (Sagada, Mountain Province) to Bicol (Naga City) to Mindanao (Tulunán, Cotabato) decided to take local action to prevent either the communist insurgents or the military from using their communities for warfare.

In the latter half of the 1990s, a second wave of such zones was created as the environment for peace in Mindanao seemed to improve with the signing of the 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF. These community-based strategies have become quite common in areas affected by Muslim separatist violence (MILF) and, in some cases, communal conflict between Muslims and Christians. The establishment of such zones was originally spontaneous as local citizens decided they could not wait for the government and the insurgents to make peace. As time went on, the tactic of community declaration was adopted by a number of NGOs or even aid donors. Essentially, local villages are organized and make a public declaration that is presented to all armed elements for their compliance. Sometimes local government at the barangay or municipal level is involved; sometimes the initiative is purely nongovernmental.

Civil society groups place a lot of store in these grassroots changes. Gaspar et al. have observed: “There is no doubt that one of the most significant signs of hope in the midst of what oftentimes appears as a bleak situation of conflict-ridden and war-torn Mindanao is the rise of grassroots initiative at peacebuilding” (2002: 248). Such zones go by many names. Originally called “Peace Zones,” some reject this term because it has been adopted by the national government, beginning with the Ramos administration (Lee 2004). Tabang Mindanaw calls its 42 community efforts “Sanctuaries for Peace;” the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) refers to “Peace and Development Communities” that have been established among former MNLF combatants; in Pikit, Cotabato, the title is “Spaces for Peace” (Mindanews: June 5, 2002).

The degree of NGO involvement in these zones of peace varies considerably. UNDP often has NGO partners who provide resources and

technical assistance, but the main emphasis is on the MNLF ex-combatants themselves. Tabang Mindanaw, aside from being an NGO itself, has local community-based civil society partners as well as outside NGOs that provide resources (technical or financial) to the effort. In Bual, Isulan, Maguindanao, by contrast, the NGO Kadtuntaya was the initiating entity in response to a particular arson attack by Christians on Muslims—and managed over the years to build a mixed Muslim-Christian cooperative as part of the effort to manage conflict.

Unfortunately, there is little research to document the effectiveness of peace zones. There are many anecdotal reasons to be skeptical. For instance, the story of the Pikit peace zones always includes the fact that war has washed over them four times since 1997 (Rufo 2004). While the motivations for grassroots efforts are clear, the benefits are much less so. An interesting negative example comes from one of the earliest peace zones, Tulunan, Cotabato, established in 1991. At the same time that it was once again being cited as a way that “peace has been kept in the area,” local residents were attempting to “declare their areas as Zones of Life. . . after the government, communist guerrillas, and civilians failed to respect the provisions of the Zone of Peace declarations” (Mindanews: February 8, 2004).

*there is little research to document the effectiveness of peace zones*

Currently, the most widely known of these entities is the Nalapaan “Space for Peace” (in Pikit, Cotabato). It is taken as a “model peace zone in Mindanao” (Catholic Relief Services 2003: 25) and has an articulate spokesman in Father Bert Layson of the local parish church. The Immaculate Conception Parish was instrumental in working to create a violence-free locality in the wake of the “all-out war” declared in 2000 by President Estrada against the MILF. In February 2001 the community simply appealed to the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the MILF not to make their community a battleground. But soon development funds of various agencies—government, nongovernment, and donor—began flowing to help residents displaced by the previous year’s fighting and to sustain development in the community. Father Bert has emphasized the need for “psychosocial” interventions (such as those provided by Balay, Inc.) to heal the wounds of war and bring warring communities together (Layson 2003). The Space for Peace example proved so attractive that neighboring *barangays* were included by mid-2002 with assistance from OXFAM and

the Notre Dame University (Cotabato City) Peace Center. And yet when the armed forces attacked the Buliok complex, the headquarters of the MILF in February 2003, conflict once again washed over this “peace zone.” Relief for displaced persons once again became the focus of attention, rather than long-term peacebuilding.

Thus the Nalapaan Space for Peace illustrates the potential and the limitations of such a horizontal strategy. Peace advocates say that the continuing urge to make such community declarations—particularly the fact that there has been a second wave of peace zones in response to the current separatist conflict—“is the *best evidence of the continuing validity of the [Peace Zone] concept*” (Santos 2005a: 10 [emphasis his]). Yet, repeatedly, community declarations have lost their force against the contending combatants (in this case, the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the MILF). Without a general peace agreement, communities remain vulnerable—as they well know.

***Without a general peace agreement, communities remain vulnerable***

*Vertical Involvement in Peace Policymaking*

One of the goals of civil society is to influence the official (Track 1) peace process itself. Depending on the proclivities of the organization, efforts might range from public agitation against a policy that does not meet the demands of the insurgents, to calling on both sides to begin/resume/complete peace talks, to lobbying for certain processual or substantive concessions, to requesting official observer status.

While conferences, calls for peace, and demonstrations all accompanied civil society reaction in the past, under the Arroyo administration it seemed that civil society organizations would have more direct influence (Arguillas 2003). The all-Mindanao peace panel included a prominent civil society activist (Irene Santiago) who has continued her activism (in the Mindanao Commission on Women and “Mothers for Peace”). The peace panel held a Multisector Peace Consultation in June 2001, which included civil society as well as elected politicians. The July 2001 peace talks had several civil society observers who were not allowed to attend the negotiating sessions themselves but could mingle with panel members at meals and during breaks (and joined panel members during the photo sessions). And after the August 2001 cessation of hostilities, the government panel accepted a civil society suggestion to include a Lumad (Datu Al

Saliling) in the Technical Working Group on Ancestral Domain as a member representing the indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup> Finally, a reorganization of the government's peace panel in late 2004 led to the inclusion of the chair of MinCODE: Sylvia Okinlay-Paraguya.

Civil society's engagement in the peace talks has had little effect, however. The most obvious reason is that the peace talks themselves have been suspended for more than two years. In March 2002, after a continuing series of incidents, the government called off further official talks. In February 2003, conflict escalated sharply as the military overran the MILF's Buliok complex in central Mindanao. And despite a July 2003 ceasefire, talks had yet to resume by the end of 2004. Civil society groups (Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society, Initiatives for International Dialogue, Institute of Bangsamoro Studies) are poised to go to Malaysia when the government and the MILF resume talks. There is even now a mechanism for accrediting observers to the formal talks (by mutual agreement of the government and the MILF). Formal talks have been bruited for more than a year, since mid-2003, but have yet to materialize.<sup>8</sup> Civil society is not invited to the informal talks and so must wait to be represented in the formal negotiations whenever they resume.

A second reason for civil society's lack of impact on the peace talks is the government's extensive use of informal, "back channel" negotiations that are beyond the reach of civil society (and, for that matter, sometimes the formal peace panel). Secret negotiations (often justified by the need for confidentiality) are held and results announced with no prior consultation. Civil society groups are well aware of how this procedure limits their influence, and calls for "transparency" are a regular feature of statements from all elements of civil society. Perhaps the most egregious example of the use of back channels came in May 2002 when (during the suspension of formal talks) the "Presidential Adviser on Special Concerns" reached agreements with the MILF without the participation of the government's peace panel. These agreements (on MILF cooperation against criminal elements in their territories as well as MILF involvement in development efforts) caused an uproar when publicized—and even led to congressional hearings. In this controversy, the anticoncession positions of Christian politicians received a good deal of attention and the Arroyo administration was thrown on the defensive (Mindanews: May 16, 2002). The weakness

*Civil society's engagement in the peace talks has had little effect*

of “secret deals secretly arrived at” was once again demonstrated, though this has caused no change in negotiation processes.

In the midst of this lack of influence of civil society on formal peace processes, there is one area of impact. A number of monitoring mechanisms have been put in place for the cessation of hostilities since the agreement was signed in 2001 (Bacani 2005; Santos 2005a), and civil society is deeply involved. There is civil society involvement in official Local Monitoring Teams set up under the August 2001 agreement. Five-member teams based at the provincial level have members from the government and MILF (one each), two nongovernment members (one nominated by each side), and a religious leader acceptable to both sides. When the Local Monitoring Teams were trained to ensure an adequate and uniform understanding of their duties, NGOs were involved in the design and implementation of the training.

Because the reports of these Local Monitoring Teams to the Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities are confidential, there is very little public evidence for the efficacy of this official process. Into this perception gap have stepped elements of civil society, led by the Davao-based IID. Bantay Cease-fire (Cease-fire Watch) involves those civil society organizations of the May 2003 Davao City conference (now known as Peaceweavers) in monitoring the cessation of hostilities between the government and the MILF (Bantay Cease-fire 2004). Theirs is not a continuing presence in the field but comprises periodic “missions” with numerous participants drawn both from the localities and from other Mindanao organizations. They have investigated incidents along with the Coordinating Committees for Cessation of Hostilities, the Local Monitoring Teams, and (since late 2004) the International Monitoring Teams led by Malaysia.

Unlike the Local Monitoring Teams, Bantay Cease-fire can publish the results of their investigations. One recurring theme that runs through their reports is how hostilities and feuds between clans (*rido*) must not be misinterpreted as fighting between government and MILF forces. And this is a common problem—when members of either side have relatives who have engaged in hostilities, they tend to join in. Information from Bantay Cease-fire (and its official equivalent, the Local Monitoring Teams) helps commanders on both sides to differentiate these familial clashes from organized hostilities.

In this way, the cessation of hostilities has been strengthened over the

years since August 2001. The efforts of Bantay Cease-fire have been commended by the Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (which include both government and MILF officials) for helping to maintain the cease-fire (Mindanews: February 7, 2004). The confidence built by the public release of the findings of Bantay Cease-fire is seen to lend momentum for formal peace talks.

### **Effects of Civil Society Involvement**

Four years after the accession of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to the presidency, civil society organizations working to mitigate conflict in Mindanao are once again as frustrated as they were with the previous Estrada administration. Formal peace talks between the government and the MILF have been suspended for more than two years, sporadic violence occurs amid accusations and counteraccusations of terrorism and cease-fire violations, and development efforts are hampered by the uncertainties caused by the lack of peace. Civil society feels that its efforts have generally had little effect. From a comparative perspective, this would not be an unusual conclusion. Hulme and Goodhand (2000: 11) have observed: “NGOs are unlikely to be a leading edge in peace-building processes and at best they complement first track [official] approaches. . . . Furthermore, when there is no effective Track One process. . . the wider impacts of NGOs on peace-building are likely to be extremely limited.”

When government and insurgents are not formally negotiating, civil society’s efforts at consultation, community peacebuilding, and lobbying seem stymied. When negotiations do take place, however, there is good reason for believing that civil society’s involvement is important. Niklas Hansson undertook a study of peace agreements from 1989 (the end of the Cold War) and 1996 and then judged whether the agreements were still being kept after five years. He found a strong relation between civil society’s success and access to the peace agreement process. Table 6 shows that of four peace agreements that had a substantial degree of civil society access, all were being kept; among the eight that did not involve civil society access, however, only one was still being kept five years after (Hansson 2003: 44, fig. 2).

In the case of Mozambique, the Mozambican Christian Council was able to play a mediation role between the government and rebels as they

*a strong relation [exists]  
between civil society’s  
success and access to the  
peace agreement process*

**Table 6. Relation Between Civil Society Access and Peace Agreement Success**

Peace Agreement		
Civil Society Access	Kept	Broken
Yes	Mozambique El Salvador South Africa Guatemala	
No	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Nicaragua Cambodia Angola I Angola II Liberia Sierra Leone Rwanda

moved toward the 1992 peace agreement. In El Salvador, a Forum for Socioeconomic Consensus was formed to enable civil society to make proposals for the negotiations (though it was dismantled a year after the 1992 peace agreement was signed). During negotiations for South Africa's 1993 Interim Constitution Agreement, representatives of religious and business groups joined the African National Congress and the ruling National Party (as well as other parties and traditional leaders). In Guatemala, a Civil Society Assembly was formed in 1994 and articulated specific proposals for the negotiation agenda (which was completed in 1996) (Hansson 2003: 38–40).<sup>9</sup>

Hansson admits that it is generally hard to judge the degree of civil society involvement and consequent effects on negotiations to end conflict. To take an Asian example, we may wonder about the relationship between lack of civil society involvement and failure of the peace process in Aceh. Aguswandi (2004) argues that the marginalization of civil society in the peace process was central to the failure of peacebuilding in Aceh, as it reduced the discussion to talks between the Indonesian government

and the separatist GAM. Aspinall and Crouch (2003: 48), however, discuss the difficulties of involving a wide range of actors in the talks, noting that “GAM was not willing to participate as just one among many Achenese groups.” The involvement of civil society in a peace process is likely to be controversial, and its effects must be traced carefully.

Two possible reasons for the relationship between civil society’s access to negotiations and whether agreements are kept—deeper consideration of underlying causes and greater legitimacy—are cited in an analysis of public participation in peacemaking (Barnes 2002: 7–8): “Effective participation mechanisms made a difference both in the quality of agreements reached characterized by a range of provisions to address the underlying causes of conflict and, in most cases, the legitimacy with which these agreements were viewed by the public.” Hansson points out that in the four cases of civil society’s access leading to agreements that were kept, civil society was “consulted” rather than directly “represented” in the negotiations. Drawing upon Barnes (2002), Hansson stipulates that “consultation” involves some mechanism—for instance, a forum for debate—in which civil society can express opinions, make nonbinding recommendations, or offer concrete proposals that may or may not be accepted. “Representation” is when civil society is directly involved in the negotiations themselves (Hansson 2003: 6). Rated on this scale, what is striking in the Philippines is the increased access that civil society has had since 1990—culminating in the appointment in late 2004 of the chair of MinCODE, Sylvia Okinlay-Paraguay, to the government’s panel. Here, we can say that civil society is indeed represented in the peace process in a way that was not the case before.

Through the mid-1990s, after agreements between the Philippine government and Muslim separatists, weak institutions were established (two autonomous regions after the Tripoli Agreement in 1976; the Special Zone of Peace and Development after the 1996 agreement with the MNLF). But these institutions led to no substantive changes in the underlying causes of the conflict. The 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the government of the Philippines and the MNLF would be in the lower right quadrant of Table 6—there was no civil society access to the peace process, and the agreement has not been kept. (The fighting has not been eliminated and the provisions of the peace agreement have not been fulfilled.)

*what is striking... is the  
increased access that  
civil society has had  
since 1990*

While considerable technical skill and political savvy went into the drafting of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, consultations were not undertaken in any public fashion—leading to considerable surprise and even outrage at many of the provisions (such as the inclusion of predominantly Christian areas in the Special Zone of Peace and Development).

Civil society groups have pointed out that they lacked access during the negotiations for the 1996 final peace agreement and note that the peace was not kept. Though there is no formal mechanism for debate, there are innumerable forums and meetings where civil society explores options for peace and strategies for settling conflicts. Elements of possible peace settlements get discussed in civil society forums, and debate ensues on whether the root causes are being addressed. Moreover, there is an attempt to build political support for action on these underlying causes. Political support is crucial in the event that a peace agreement is reached; civil society's view is that the time to begin building a case for the peace settlement is during the negotiations themselves. In 1996, overwhelming opposition from Christian areas to what were seen as suddenly unveiled concessions to the MNLF hampered the implementation of that agreement—with lasting negative effects.

This leads to the question of legitimacy, or a constituency for peace. Paul Oquist (2002) points out that “victory” as a policy position has as much support within the Philippine government as efforts to achieve a negotiated peace. Not only do most members of the security forces believe that victory is possible, but many prominent Christian politicians oppose significant concessions and support “firm” policies. Thus internal debates characterize all Philippine national administrations, policy stability is difficult, and peace negotiations are hampered.

In fact, peace agreements of some sort have been reached since the 1976 Tripoli Agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government. A “Final Agreement on the Implementation of the Tripoli Agreement” (known as the Final Peace Agreement) was signed between the MNLF and the government in 1996, but disputes about whether it has been correctly implemented continue to this day. Meanwhile, peace talks with the MILF have been taking place off-and-on ever since 1997. Thus Oquist notes (2002: 1–2): “Peace negotiations and agreements between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the various rebel groups have existed for over a quarter of a century but not one of them has been carried to a successful conclusion.” His analysis of the

“extreme protraction” concludes that three policy positions—pacification (concessions to cease open hostilities); military victory; and developmental policies that address the roots of conflict—all garner roughly equal support within the political elite. In particular, Oquist emphasizes the political base of the military victory position in public opinion throughout the Philippines (documented through many survey findings) and in local governments in Christian areas of Mindanao. Thus to move toward a developmental policy approach requires agitation both within the government and within the sphere of public opinion to create a consensus on achieving sustainable peace in Mindanao. Much of the activity of civil society aims at building the constituency for the developmental approach. Civil society thus far has had almost no success in influencing public opinion—which is not surprising since NGOs are unknown to most people.<sup>10</sup> At the level of policy elites (businesspeople, media, and religious leaders) and government officials, civil society has had more impact. Particularly since the Estrada administration’s “all-out war” in 2000, there has been a concerted effort to explain to Manila elites the issues behind possible peace in Mindanao. In this way it seems that developmental policies to resolve root causes of the conflict are able to withstand the skepticism of politicians who respond to the victory position’s popularity among the Christian electorate.

Certainly, civil society in all its variety lobbies against the victory position, argues that military solutions are impossible, and sees itself as already a constituency for peace. And despite the limited reach of civil society (and its lack of representativeness), given the disconnect in the Philippines between political discourse and survey measurements of public opinion,<sup>11</sup> media coverage of civil society activities can influence the decisions of political elites out of proportion to the scope of mobilization of civil society. In this way, political momentum against the victory position can be built (which is a good thing, assuming the victory position is an illusion). In short, civil society organizations have been able to help the government move toward peace (as in consultations leading up the August 2001 cessation of hostilities agreement with the MILF) or help roll back the level of conflict (as in agitation for a restoration of the cease-fire in July 2003 after the assault on the Buliok complex).

While carrying out their lobbying role, elements of the Mindanao

*At the level of policy elites and government officials, civil society has had more impact*

peace movement often look for a wider role in building an agenda for sustainable peace. They recognize that broad development policies are needed to restructure political and social relations to achieve a lasting cessation of violence and so they address such issues. Depending on ideological leanings, they coalesce with business organizations (in the Kusog Mindanao movement) or lobby against all foreign investment (in the InPeace movement). Church-influenced groups in particular talk about “peace transformation,” looking for a wholesale restructuring of relations among communities. But civil society organizations have run into political limits when trying to promote an aggregation of interests (Rood 1992). NGO activists are repeatedly baffled by politicians’ ability to win elections over

***civil society has less  
impact promoting a  
broad peace agenda***

“good governance” alternatives being supported by civil society. Specific environmental lobbying (antilogging or antimining) has considerably greater success than general restructuring of social and economic life (zero solid waste campaigns).<sup>12</sup> In short, civil society has less impact promoting a broad peace agenda than when it is articulating specific demands (“resume the peace talks now”).

Thus civil society’s most important effect is achieved by lobbying on particular issues. Political contestation among the various perspectives takes place within the government at any time. The ability of civil society to affect governmental decision making varies from administration to administration (e.g., Ramos’s sponsorship of the National Unification Commission versus Estrada’s distance from civil society) and within administrations (e.g., the Arroyo administration has many members with a civil society activist background but their influence waxes and wanes). Still, consistent pressure by civil society would make it more likely that the government reaches an irreversible tipping point and decides that a negotiated settlement is necessary.

One thing hindering civil society’s ability to influence governmental policymaking lies in its (real or alleged) political bias. Gaspar et al. (2002: 77) lament that peace activities are “branded,” while Hansson (2003: 27–28) stoutly maintains that governments should not confuse civil society and armed movements that share the same political goals—since civil society does not engage in armed struggle. When it comes to independence for Muslim areas of the Philippines, civil society is much more willing to countenance discussions than is the Philippine government (or the

majority Christian public opinion). It is not surprising, in this case, that the government views such expressions with suspicion and that civil society (in turn) often will issue statements to produce a balanced impression aimed at both the government and the MILF (as did Geneva Call or the May 2003 Davao City conference).

At the local level, civil society often does dampen tensions that could spread to wider arenas and threaten the Track 1 process. Interreligious dialogue and spaces for peace are meant to demonstrate that peace is indeed possible and practical and that benefits flow from peace (just as costs flow from war). Bantay Cease-fire has added to the information flow between the government and the MILF, minimizing misunderstandings that could escalate into violent incidents. In these efforts, even at the community level, organizations try to go beyond specific individuals or localities by targeting religious, government, security, or insurgent leaders for persuasion and engaging in networking efforts to broaden sectors involved in a peace process.

Ashutosh Varshney (2001; 2002) insists on the need for formal interethnic associations to dampen ethnic conflict. At first glance, Mindanao civil society does not seem to fulfill this condition. Almost all civil society organizations are drawn from one community—formal groups with both Christian and Muslim membership are few (Pakigdait is an exception). Yet there are two ways that this limitation can be overcome. The first is in spaces for peace. In Bual, Isulan, Maguindanao, for instance, Kaduntaya (a Muslim NGO) has provided assistance to a community ravaged by intercommunal conflict in the late 1990s and helped set up a cooperative that has both Muslim and Christian officers and members (SAMAKANA). Second, the interreligious dialogue groups and shifting networks that civil society uses to pursue a peace agenda continually bring together Muslims and Christians.

In an interesting fashion, civil society can also assist elements of the government to undertake conflict management. Civil society paradoxically strengthens the state in a number of different ways (Rood 1993). Local Monitoring Teams set up to help police the 2001 cessation of hostilities include civil society elements in order to provide a buffer between the government and MILF sites. The parallel activity initiated by civil society, Bantay Cease-fire, has drawn praise from both the government and the MILF for helping to provide impartial analysis of different accusations (including whether the MILF has a camp harboring Jemaah Islamiah operatives).

*agreements not vetted by  
public discussion may  
prove impossible to keep*

Civil society can promote discussion of options for peace—including draft peace agreements devised by both sides—allowing exploration of ideas that cannot be officially taken up by either side. Yet neither the government nor the MILF seems ready to take advantage of this possibility, preferring to keep the progress of peace agreements largely confidential until both parties are willing to sign publicly. The danger is that agreements not vetted by public discussion may prove impossible to keep—as suggested by the data in Table 6.

### Lessons

The problem with the present uneasy truce is that the continued conflict has, whether it is widely realized or not, unacceptable costs to the Philippines as a whole. Inward investment is hampered, particularly in one of the potentially richest parts of the country; government resources are drained by the military effort required to contain the violence; and disaffected Muslim insurgents have shown an occasional willingness to take the conflict to the heart of the Philippine polity. The bombings of public transport in Manila in December 2000 were a deadly reminder of this. Filipino Muslim discontent has resonance in the whole Southeast Asian region, too, and provides fertile ground for at least the suspicion of terrorist involvement in the southern Philippines (International Crisis Group 2003; 2004).

Civil society can play a key role in a peace strategy, should the Philippine government and the MILF adopt such a strategy. Peace panels officially operate in the strict confines of instructions from their principals whereas civil society discussions can range across many issues. In this way, public brainstorming arises and peace negotiators can note the reaction of the citizenry in general (or that of particular stakeholders), to promising ideas. At the local level, agitation by “conflict entrepreneurs” can be countered by concrete benefits in spaces for peace and community organizers can demonstrate the value of managing rather than exacerbating conflict. And if in the end a peace agreement is reached, civil society could help the Philippine state in many ways to monitor the agreement, deliver particular results to particular communities, and bridge the differences between Christians and Muslims.

If the chances of such optimism coming to fruition are to be maxi-

mized, a number of recommendations are worth considering. Official development assistance has often been crucial in the past decade of peace-making efforts. USAID has several programs in Mindanao. In particular, the Growth with Equity in Mindanao project helped to get the Mindanao Business Council, the ARMM Business Council, and the Muslim Business Forum on their feet. The United Nations Development Program works in over 100 villages to build “Peace and Development Communities,” drawing from former MNLF combatants, and has managed to rebuild structures in those communities directly affected by the 2000 “all-out war” against the MILF. The Local Government Support Program of the Canadian International Development Agency pays particular attention to conflict-affected municipalities and has introduced conflict impact analysis to civil society and others. And international donors in general have been supporting civil society (to the point where worries about dependence typically crop up). Thus several recommendations can be made:

- Muslim civil society must be strengthened in order to rectify some of the Muslim/Christian imbalance in NGOs. Donors have an unfortunate tendency to rely on established, Christian civil society organizations that have the track record and financial management systems to make success more likely in short-term programs. While Muslims are grateful for particular benefits received, suspicion of Christian delivery mechanisms is inevitable (McKenna 2000). A robust Muslim civil society would not only obviate such suspicions but provide an outlet for grievances that might otherwise be channeled to separatism.
- When undertaking this approach to Muslim civil society, Varshney’s emphasis on intercommunity organizations must be kept in mind. Thus special attention should be paid to boosting the institutional capacity of networks in order to transform them from shifting alliances into organizations capable of bringing together Muslims and Christians in a sustained fashion.
- Donors must be clear-eyed about the ideological characteristics of civil society. Just as MNLF-linked NGOs were provided with grants and other forms of assistance after the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, groups sympathetic to the MILF will provide useful conduits for development assistance. Mindanao-wide,

*Donors must be clear-eyed about the ideological characteristics of civil society*

the division between the militant left and mainstream organizations is unlikely to be bridged. Rather than programming to try to produce one mega-network, choices must be made as to which groups are to be provided with resources to pursue their goals.

- Analyses of what works and what does not work must be undertaken. There has been so much experience in Mindanao of varying approaches to peacebuilding, often with dozens of cases, that statistical analysis can be coupled with systematic empirical work. Does interreligious dialogue change attitudes? What strategies are best used at the community level? Which factors alleviate Muslim/Christian mistrust? Empirical research can serve as a guide.
- Conflict management work must include local governments, which are often bypassed by livelihood or social programs. The Philippines has a decentralized local government system (one that encourages civil participation in municipal governance), as well as a decentralized mode of politics. Local political leaders of whatever stripe are insulted when donors tell them that funds will go to communities because the government cannot be trusted. Not only does this policy sacrifice any leverage on, say, Christian politicians opposed to concessions, but an overseas donor's project is limited in time and a hope for sustainability is found in the budget of local governments.
- Finally, progress must be made on changing the hearts and minds of the Christian majority populace that is typically opposed to concessions necessary to satisfy demands for Muslim religious and cultural preservation. Free and open debate must be encouraged, and wider stakeholder participation in the peace process must be made possible. Peace talks cannot be undertaken with only "confidentiality" in mind. Interreligious dialogue, discussion of peace options, and interaction between stakeholders and decision makers are not a luxury.
- The comparative advantage of civil society working for peace lies in its ability to reach policy elites in Manila and local governments and its ability to work in partnership with citizens in particular communities such as the peace zones. Working to link these arenas and building momentum for a sustainable peace remain the potential contribution of the civil society peace movement.

# Endnotes

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1. The survey had 100 respondents each from ARMM areas (except Basilan due to the security situation at that time) and Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga City, and Cotabato City. This survey of 800 respondents was carried out by The Asia Foundation, with funding from the Hewlett Foundation, in cooperation with the Office of the (Philippine) President and NFO-TRENDS. None of the institutions mentioned bear any responsibility for the interpretations offered here.
2. The “Manifesto” from the May 12–14, 2003, “Mindanao Leaders Peace Conference” (at Cagayan de Oro) is available at [www.mindanews.com/peprcs/cdo.html](http://www.mindanews.com/peprcs/cdo.html). The “Unity Statement” from the May 13–15, 2003, “Peace in MindaNOW” conference (at Davao) is available at [www.mindanews.com/peprcs/dvo.html](http://www.mindanews.com/peprcs/dvo.html). These two groups are reflected repeatedly throughout this study. A Muslim-Christian Interfaith Conference was held in Zamboanga City, May 20–22, 2003, but it was essentially a repeat of the Cagayan de Oro conference. The resolutions can be found at [www.mindanews.com/peprcs/zambo.html](http://www.mindanews.com/peprcs/zambo.html).
3. The Maranaos, one of the three major Muslim ethnic groups, come from the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur. Maguindanaos come from the province of Maguindanao, and Tausugs from the island province of Sulu. There are a number of other Muslim ethnic groups, and this diversity has hampered unity among Muslims.

4. Their comprehensive website, as befits a group that includes the Philippines' major media groups as task force members, is at <http://tabangmindanaw.marian-solidarity.com/index.php>.
5. While most of the civil society groups issued public statements against the Balikatan exercises, the wider grouping Kusog Mindanaw took no position on Balikatan, as elected officials would have walked out of a roundtable discussion of the issue.
6. This can be carried to extremes: in 1987 the five-peso bill carried a notice of the canonization of St. Lorenzo Ruiz, and in 1991 a notice about the Catholic Church's Second Plenary Council of the Philippines.
7. For lack of space, the complex issues deriving from the presence of indigenous peoples (neither settler nor Muslim) in Mindanao are omitted from this study even though they affect both the prospects of achieving a peace settlement with Muslim separatists and civil society efforts at conflict management.
8. Some of the delay seems to be due to the fact that Malaysia hosts the talks. In late 2003, the Malaysian government seemed preoccupied with hosting the summit of the Organization of Islamic Countries and then immediately thereafter had to deal with a prime ministerial succession. Other causes of the delay include the MILF's demand for (and the government's refusal of) complete withdrawal of the Armed Forces of the Philippines from positions occupied in early 2003 in Buliok. By early 2005, all conditions had been fulfilled for resumption, but formal talks have yet (April 30, 2005) to resume.
9. The only outlier in Hansson's table is the agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the success of which can be attributed to extraordinary international pressure, foreign assistance, and tens of thousands of foreign peacekeepers.
10. A Social Weather Stations survey in 1991 found that only 20 percent could respond to this question: "Here in your area, what is the most important NGO/organization that helps people?" (Rood 1992: 113). Though the data are dated, there is no reason to expect a change in the general level of awareness of NGOs.
11. The Philippines has high-quality periodic surveys of public opinion, but political discourse does not generally reflect this. For instance, political commentary on U.S. military training exercises is almost uniformly critical—as any perusal of Philippine newspapers will show—despite data (noted earlier) showing broad public support for the exercises. Political commentators in the Philippines tend to use surveys almost exclusively to measure the "horse race" aspects of electoral contests.
12. Despite newspaper headlines about rampant logging, antilogging activities have in fact influenced the behavior of both corporations and communities involved in harvesting timber. Objections to the 1994 Mining Act managed to delay for at least a decade any new mining activities in the Philippines. On the other hand, despite a legislative victory in the Solid Waste Act, the envisioned transformation in community behavior and waste disposal continues to look unlikely in the extreme.

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## Background Information



## Background of the Moro Conflict

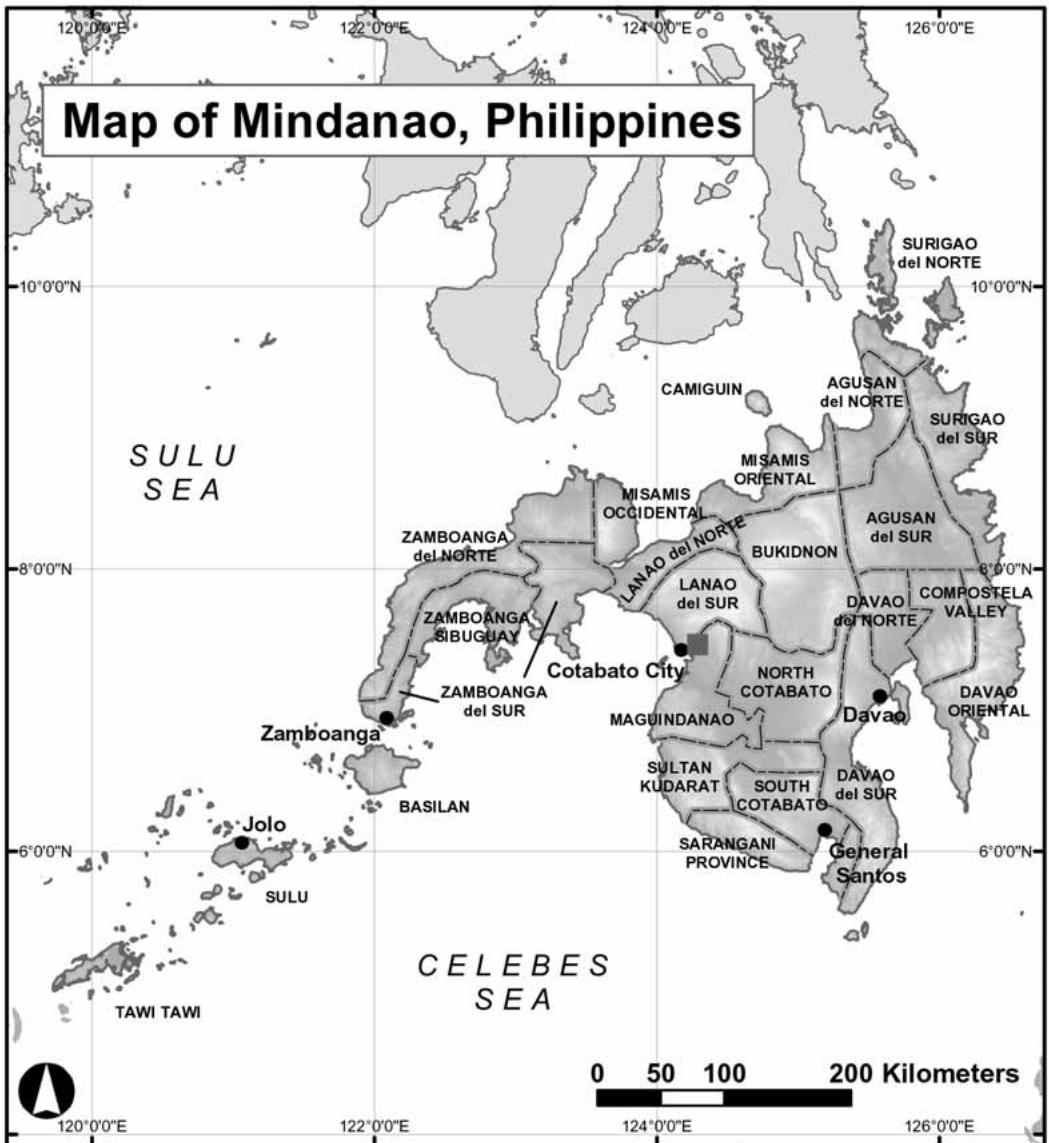
The Philippines traces its unique status as Asia's sole Christian-majority state to more than three centuries of Spanish colonial rule (1565–1898). Ninety percent of the country's 82 million people profess Christianity today, but in the southwestern provinces of the Sulu archipelago and western Mindanao, where Spanish control came late and remained tenuous, indigenous state formation proceeded much further than anywhere else in the country, undergirding a tradition of resistance to alien rule. Muslim sultanates in Sulu (from about 1450), Cotabato (c.1515) and Lanao (c.1600) retained varying degrees of independence well into the nineteenth century, only becoming fully incorporated into the Philippines under the aegis of American colonialism (1898–1946), and giving rise to a transcendent, multi-tribal “Moro” identity. In the final decades of U.S. rule, and accelerating through the 1950s and 1960s, mass migration from the Christian North to the Mindanao frontier fundamentally altered the demographic balance in the South, today leaving Muslim majorities in only five of the region's twenty-five provinces. This shift coincided with a revival of Islamic consciousness beginning in the 1950s.

Intensifying electoral competition in the newly vote-rich South between 1967–71, combined with proliferating land disputes and armed militias, led to a spiral of sectarian polarization. Beginning in Cotabato province, at the forefront of postwar Christian in-migration, in early 1970, militia skirmishes spread rapidly to Lanao in 1971 and Zamboanga in early 1972. President Ferdinand Marcos, facing the end of his final term in office, cited this disorder in imposing martial law on the country in September 1972 and overthrowing the constitutional system. By December, the armed forces were locked in full-scale civil war with the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) on the island of Jolo, and by early 1973, mainland Mindanao was also at war. The intercession of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, lead by Libya, helped bring about a cease-fire and autonomy agreement in Tripoli in December 1976, but the subsequent splintering of the MNLF into a number of contending factions, and disputes over Tripoli's implementation, have continued to draw the conflict out. To date, possibly 120,000 have died in the fighting, and millions have been displaced.

A “final” autonomy agreement mediated by Jakarta in 1996 now embraces all five Muslim-majority provinces, but has failed to satisfy pop-

ular expectations, or the demands of three main armed factions. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which broke away from the MNLF after Tripoli, commands widespread support among Maguindanao and Maranao Muslims in the Cotabato and Lanao regions, and is engaged in a fragile peace process supported by Malaysia and the United States. An MNLF faction lead by imprisoned founding chairman Nur Misuari is strongest in Sulu. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), centered on the Sulu and Basilan islands, is far smaller, but highly mobile, and draws on kinship ties with MNLF and MILF members to seek refuge from government forces. At other times ASG and government elements may act in collusion. Further complicating this volatile situation are transnational terrorist networks linked to Jemaah Islamiyah and al-Qaeda, which view the Southern Philippines as a key front in their wider regional and global *jihad*.

# Map of Mindanao, Philippines



- Cities
- Camp Abu Bakr
- ⚡ District Boundaries

**Note:** Tawi Tawi, Sulu, Basilan and Camiguin all have district status.

*Note:* Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.



## **Project Information**



## The Dynamics and Management of Internal Conflicts in Asia

### Project Rationale, Purpose and Outline

Project Director: Muthiah Alagappa  
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 Danilyn Rutherford (Papua)  
 Christopher Collier (southern Philippines)  
 Gardner Bovingdon (Xinjiang)  
 Elliot Sperling (Tibet)

#### *Rationale*

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan, Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries; although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were suppressed, the political systems in these countries as well as in Vietnam continue to confront problems of political legitimacy that could become acute; and radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. And the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia (as elsewhere) can be traced to three issues—national identity, political legitimacy (the title to rule), and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and the transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over the legitimacy of political system has declined in Asia. However, political legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time and the legitimacy of the remaining communist and authoritarian systems is likely to confront challenges in due

course. The project deals with internal conflicts arising from the process of constructing national identity with specific focus on conflicts rooted in the relationship of minority communities to the nation-state. Here too many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities but several states including some major ones still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

### *Purpose*

The project investigates the dynamics and management of five key internal conflicts in Asia—Aceh and Papua in Indonesia, the Moro conflict in the southern Philippines, and the conflicts pertaining to Tibet and Xinjiang in China. Specifically it investigates the following:

1. Why (on what basis), how (in what form), and when does group differentiation and political consciousness emerge?
2. What are the specific issues of contention in such conflicts? Are these of the instrumental or cognitive type? If both, what is the relationship between them? Have the issues of contention altered over time? Are the conflicts likely to undergo further redefinition?
3. When, why, and under what circumstances can such contentions lead to violent conflict? Under what circumstances have they not led to violent conflict?
4. How can the conflicts be managed, settled, and eventually resolved? What are policy choices? Do options such as national self-determination, autonomy, federalism, electoral design, and consociationalism exhaust the list of choices available to meet the aspirations of minority communities? Are there innovative ways of thinking about identity and sovereignty that can meet the aspirations of the minority communities without creating new sovereign nation-states?
5. What is the role of the regional and international communities in the protection of minority communities?
6. How and when does a policy choice become relevant?

### *Design*

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the respective Asian countries including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, the United States, and Australia. For composition of study groups please see the participants list.

All five study-groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C. from September 29 through October 3, 2002. Over a period of four days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the five conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting five research monograph length studies (one per conflict) and twenty policy papers (four per conflict) were commissioned.

Study groups met separately for the second meeting. The Aceh and Papua study group meetings were held in Bali on June 16–17, the southern Philippines study group met in Manila on June 23, and the Tibet and Xinjiang study groups were held in Honolulu on August 20–22, 2003. The third meeting of all study groups was held in Washington, D.C. from February 28 to March 2, 2004. These meetings reviewed recent developments relating to the conflicts, critically reviewed the first drafts of the policy papers prepared for the project, reviewed the book proposals by the principal researchers, and identified new topics for research.

### *Publications*

The project will result in five research monographs (book length studies) and about twenty policy papers.

*Research Monographs.* To be authored by the principal researchers, these monographs present a book-length study of the key issues pertaining to each of the five conflicts. Subject to satisfactory peer review, the monographs will appear in the East-West Center Washington series Asian Security, and the East-West Center series Contemporary Issues in the Asia Pacific, both published by the Stanford University Press.

*Policy Papers.* The policy papers provide a detailed study of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000-

to 25,000-word essays will be published in the East-West Center Washington Policy Studies series, and be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, United States, and other relevant countries.

### *Public Forums*

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Two public forums were organized in Washington, D.C. in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by the United States-Indonesia Society, discussed the Aceh and Papua conflicts. The second forum, cosponsored by the United States Institute of Peace, the Asia Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center, and the Sigur Center of The George Washington University, discussed the Tibet and Xinjiang conflicts.

Public forums were also organized in Jakarta and Manila in conjunction with the second study group meetings. The Jakarta public forum on Aceh and Papua, cosponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, and the southern Philippines public forum cosponsored by the Policy Center of the Asian Institute of Management attracted key persons from government, media, think tanks, activist groups, diplomatic community, and the public.

In conjunction with the third study group meetings, also held in Washington, D.C., three public forums were offered. The first forum, cosponsored by the United States-Indonesia Society, addressed the conflicts in Aceh and Papua. The second forum, cosponsored by the Sigur Center of The George Washington University, discussed the conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang. A third forum was held to discuss the conflict in the southern Philippines. This forum was cosponsored by the United States Institute of Peace.

### *Funding Support*

This project is supported with a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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## About this Issue

This study investigates the role of civil society in forging sustainable peace in Mindanao. Civil society's involvement in peace efforts can improve the chances of a lasting settlement—both in terms of addressing underlying causes and in terms of building a constituency for the concessions needed for a peace agreement. There are limitations to the effectiveness of civil society, however, due both to certain characteristics of these organizations (such as their ideological divisions or their lack of representativeness of the whole Filipino community) and to the inherent nature of civil society (its inability to aggregate interests in order to achieve a wider settlement). In the end, civil society can have an impact in making it politically possible for policy elites to adopt positions other than that of “victory” (which seems to be the preferred policy stance of the general Christian Philippine citizenry). Through articulation of issues and networking, through activities parallel to the formal peace process, and through their efforts to bridge communal divides, civil society organizations keep alive the prospect for peace in Mindanao that sometimes seems forever elusive.

## About the Author

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