EMBEDDING FEEDBACK MECHANISMS:

BRINGING VOICES FROM THE GROUND TO THE GPH-MILF PEACE TALKS

ELIZABETH M. PADILLA

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By
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTS	-	Applied Conflict Transformation Studies
AFP	-	Armed Forces of the Philippines
BJE	-	Bangsamoro Juridical Entity
BOT	-	Board of Trustees
CDD	-	Community Driven Development
CSO	-	Civil Society Organization
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
GPH	-	Government of the Philippines
ICG	-	International Contact Group
IDP	-	Internally Displaced Persons
IMT	-	International Monitoring Team
LGU	-	Local Government Unit
MILF	-	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MOA-AD	-	Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain
NGO	-	Non-Government Organization
PO	-	Peoples Organization
RSD	-	Right to Self-Determination
SALAM	-	Sustainable Alternatives for the Advancement of Mindanao
SC	-	Supreme Court
TRO	-	Temporary Restraining Order

ABSTRACT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the following paragraphs I would like to recognize a number of individuals to whom I am greatly indebted. It is the support of these people which has ensured my action research project and my completion of the ACTS course became a reality.

First I express my gratitude to SALAM, its staff, my colleagues and the Board of Trustees (BOT) who gave me the opportunity to take up the Applied Conflict Transformation Studies course. Their continued backing through all of the ups and downs has allowed me to mark a significant milestone in my life. I also give my sincere thanks to Emma Leslie, for the immense encouragement, patience and assistance she has shown me. Without her kindness I could not have pressed forward to arrive where I am today.

Second, my heartfelt thanks to the distinguished faculty members of ACTS: to Kerry, Ngarm, Kaloy and Ike for their tremendous support and input throughout the project; to Vesna and Pushpa who, despite the short period of time I was able to spend with them, have shared a great deal of knowledge and insight; to my advisors Dr. Chona Echavez and Tania Miletic for their time, commitment and for being understanding throughout the process; And, to Monica Alfred – the ACTS coordinator – who has challenged me with her invaluable comments and advice. In addition I thank my fellow students who have contributed numerous ideas to reflect upon during the study; the food for thought which they have provided has certainly helped shape the pages below.

Last but by no means least I direct a special thanks to my husband and children. My husband, Billy, has endured with me, supported me and challenged me in this journey, while my two sons, Ethan and EJ, have been the source of my strength and inspiration.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conflict in Mindanao is pervasive, complex and recurring. In addition the conflict is deep rooted and multi-faceted and it is the convergence of these characteristics which ensure no single formula for effective peace negotiation exists. This action research recognizes this gap and attempts to develop and integrate into the ongoing negotiations a mechanism to feedback the voices of the victims of violence at the local level to the higher level discussions.

The Sustainable Alternatives for the Advancement of Mindanao (SALAM, Inc.) is an organization which is situated in the midst of this intricate conflict system. One of the group's central concerns is the inclusiveness of the agreements reached at the negotiation table and therefore the sustainability of peace over the long run. Motivated by this issue, to fortify the durability of peace SALAM is currently attempting to channel issues and concerns expressed by the people in the community to the negotiating parties of the Government of the Philippines and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (GPH-MILF). This it is hoped will facilitate sustainable peace in a community that has persistently suffered at the hands of violent conflict.

However even in light of such good intention SALAM as an organization needs to further develop its niche in the field of peace building to become truly effective in assisting the conflict-affected communities – this fact is in essence the driving force of the research project about to be discussed. During the research project, as well as continuing afterwards, it was hoped that SALAM's process of specialization could help the victims of conflict articulate their issues, concerns and aspirations relative to the stake which they possess in the ongoing peace process. In line with this desire both this research project and its broader aims hope to contribute to a peace process that is anchored genuinely in the spirit of dialogue, inclusiveness and greater participation of various peace stakeholders are essential.

To generate the data for this action research several collection methods were employed, these were focus group discussion (FGD) and by clarifying issues and points of interest through question and answer sessions. The data was then categorized, analyzed and subjected to the action-reflection-action process to draw out the significant lessons. These learnings in turn have been weaved into the pages of this research paper and facilitated the following key findings:

1) Conceptual clarity is important in defining an organizations vision and role, particularly when analyzing and shifting the theory of change;

2) Constructive communication is a significant factor in achieving desired change;

3) Creating the space to exchange views is essential for mutual trust and relationship building;

4) The opportunity to communicate and articulate your opinions can be liberating, and;

5) Recognizing and accepting limitations can be a driver of change.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Most major armed conflicts today, like the Mindanao conflict in my context, are multidimensional struggles that spill across the international, state and societal levels, making them difficult to resolve or transform. Complicating this situation is that negotiation processes are often slow and gradual procedures (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005:174), a reality sadly experienced in the talks between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (GPH-MILF). Moreover due to the complex characteristics of conflict there is no single formula or framework to comprehensively model peace negotiations on, and this factor not only further draws out the process but adds to its fragility.

According to Aggestam (1999) framing and reframing issues, and changing the parties' perceptions and understandings of both the conflict and the potential outcomes are a crucial part of a successful peace process (cited in Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005:182). Good settlements should not only bridge the conflicting parties' interests, but also represent and reflect the sentiments, issues, concerns and dreams of the wider community in which the conflict is situated. These statements should not only apply to the top level; while the peace process – and transformation of conflict at large – is a grand process, it is also important to remember that peace in practice will be an image of those who have the most at stake. In this case, especially because of the implications for socio-economic prosperity, political stability, and cultural preservation, it is the community level which should receive weighty consideration during negotiations. What is certain is that the success of achieving this link between top and bottom levels has severe consequences for the peace process' success and durability.

Recognizing the extreme community vulnerability in in the northern Mindanao region, several development organizations have begun engaging in a range of peacebuilding activities – particularly in areas afflicted with intractable conflict. My organization, SALAM Inc., has assumed its share of this work in Lanao del Norte with activities spanning from psychosocial services to community peace education to the establishment of livelihood projects. However as an insider I have acknowledged that the work of SALAM and the other development organizations are not achieving enough for the cause of peace, perhaps because of a focus on short-term projects where a long-term vision is required. Although unable to generalize across all the organizations I am able to identify the problem within

SALAM: we have not fully integrated the foundations of peacebuilding and conflict transformation into our programs and projects, and need to adjust our timeframes. A possible remedy for this weakness could be to shift the role of SALAM to focus more intensively on approaches to peace which link the top and bottom levels of the conflict system.

Freire (1970) states dialogic approaches to conflict resolution aim to reach a common understanding between parties through facilitating the exchange of views via a common language. This in turn creates an environment of cultural understanding, trust, respect, commitment, and – importantly to this discussion – ownership of the peace process. Based on this logic (and the additional problems identified above), there is an apparent need to develop a mechanism for the transmission of community voices from the ground to the negotiating parties. As SALAM has not achieved the community-level impact which it had envisioned and is looking to strengthen its role in the facilitation of peace in Lanao del Norte, this gap is seen as a significant and unique opportunity. Engaging it would help the organization through three areas of achievement: securing a niche in the field of peacebuilding in the area, providing the impetus for a shift in organizational structure, and ultimately increasing effect support for the peace process at large. It is on this basis that the importance of this action research project is made clear.

Furthermore there are two key assumptions which have been made and used to guide this paper. Firstly, feeding-back can be an important step in the processes of peace building and conflict transformation. Secondly, non-threatening communication strategies can facilitate common understanding and perceptions thereby build trust and providing space for these processes to occur.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim

Based on the abovementioned research problem, my research aim is: To develop an effective feedback mechanism in the GRH-MILF peace process, using SALAM as a tool for articulating the concerns of people in conflict-ridden communities to the negotiating parties. Moreover this aim will help me to better understand the process of instigating the required institutional change in SALAM, and how to relate this to engaging and transforming the attitudes, behaviors and social conditions of the wider community which is exposed to conflict in Mindanao.

Objectives

Accordingly the main objectives of this action research project are:

Through the first cycle of reflection,

1) To explore how to best facilitate the process of learning in order to generate the views, opinions and ideas of developing and integrating feedback mechanisms within the organization.
2) To determine what are the conditions which must exist in order to have an effective feedback mechanism within the context of the GPH-MILF Peace Process.

Through the second cycle of reflection,

3) Discover how to enhance my role, knowledge, skills and attitude while working with my colleagues, BOT members and the community people in the conduct of meetings and discussion.
4) Define the emotions, behaviors, attitudes and relationships of my colleagues, BOT members, and the community during my interaction with them.
5) Understand how the people that were selected for the study were engaged in the process overall.

CHAPTER 2
RESEARCH DESIGN

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Action Research Design

This action research project follows an action-reflection-action methodology. It employed participatory action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005:109) which involved my staff and colleagues, members of the Board of Trustees (BOT), the community residents in Brgy. Tacub, and the MILF Peace Panel.

The study significantly posed questions at three layers of attention. The first layer focused on myself as the central party of this research. Aware of the dangers of this I placed great importance on utilizing self-reflection and self-evaluation, and being constantly aware of my personal values and motivation for embarking on this journey. The second layer centered on my work vis-à-vis my organization's interventions in the communities, and incorporates other significant peace stakeholders. This looks into the impact of the CDD interventions and how these activities enabled the community to cope with their exposure to conflict. The third layer looked towards the intention of this study to contribute to sustaining peace and the development of communities where the peace process is underway.

Research Cycles

The project involved three formal cycles of research, and in each cycle action-reflection-analysis was employed until the project had yielded sufficient learning (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005:22) – refer to the diagram in Figure 2. Notably the last cycle was designed to measure the extent to which the organization applied the intended structural changes, and I can report that I truly and thoroughly tested it.

However, during the actual conduct of the study a number of significant but unexpected events took place. Of these one was subsequently included as a separate cycle since I realized that it had important implications for the findings. Even though unplanned it was indeed providential that this event happened whilst I was conducting the last leg of the activity cycle, and it was an opportunity which simply could not be passed up.

While this paper has yielded several interesting findings perhaps the most valuable product is the numerous opportunities which have arisen for SALAM. These have given, and continue to give, the organization the opportunity to identify and bridge key gaps and continue to sensibly represent the voices' of the people of the region.

Figure 1: Research Cycles that follows Action-Reflection-Action process
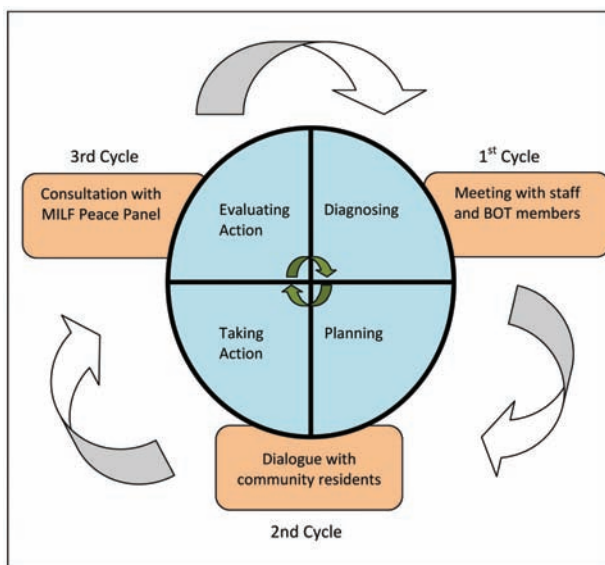
Adapted from: Coghlan, D. & Brannick, T. (2005)

Sample

The sample that was used for this project can be seen as three sub-groups: the organization, the community and the MILF Panel. Although differing slightly from the original plan there was a diverse array of sources used in this study, particularly during the process of exploring the unexpected event which I mentioned above.

The sample taken from my organization involved the staff and the BOT members (totaling to 10 people, four males and six females). These individuals were considered as research subjects from whom part of the data needed to complete this action research was collected.

For the community sample I chose Brgy. Tacub. Out of the three barangays where SALAM is undertaking development projects only this barangay had received

all three components of our interventions. Of the 60 members of the people's organization (PO) about 31 participants were selected to be involved in the focus group discussion, comprising of 26 women and 5 men. I purposely chose them because apart from having directly experienced violence during the attack in 2008, they were the first direct recipients of the psychosocial, peace education and livelihood assistance from SALAM.

Lastly, for the MILF sample I selected the 6 male members of the peace panel. This was the sample that I decided to add late in the process as the event took place near the conclusion of the study. Since it was an MILF-initiated activity it was apparent that the peace panel members were the ones who wished to clarify the issues put forward by the various parties.

Data Collection

The methods that I employed to collect data followed the action-reflection-action framework, consisting of activities such as group meetings, focus group discussions, and a forum that provided a venue for clarifying the perceived community peace and conflict issues. The first two methods were utilized for the staff, the BOT, and the community level discussions; the latter was used with the MILF Peace Panel. In addition data and information which was seen to be supporting the theoretical foundation of this study was gathered from existing literature.

For the community FGD, the questions were categorized into three major issues: a) perceptions and changes (knowledge, attitudes, feelings) brought about by SALAM's interventions; b) knowledge and participation in the peace process; c) what to expect from the peace process, and; d) recommendations and challenges. Though the findings are presented thematically and may appear to be coached, it should be noted that great caution was taken to ensure respondents were able to answer as they wished and in their own time.

Another tool used throughout this project has been a research journal, wherein I made sure to document personal reflections and learning derived from each cycle of the process. Though this action was not carried out extremely regularly, it was still able to capture all the activities and subsequent thoughts involved in the study. The entries were not only limited to commentaries relevant to "me", but also sought to analyze the additional levels of "us" and "them". Sections of the journal were then selected for use according to the usefulness and significance of the subject matter.

Data Analysis

Information, observations and data generated from the various methods employed were categorized and analyzed with the use of action-reflection analysis. The generated data was then grouped and classified according to themes so as to clearly present the apparent patterns and relationships which together tackle the guiding research questions. Following this the significant learnings generated from the action and reflection cycle were utilized to effect change within the organization, and at the same time reflected upon and analyzed vis-à-vis the research aim and objectives and the theoretical foundations of the study.

Action and Reflection

As has been mentioned above this research project utilizes the action-reflection-action framework and process, as shown in Figure 2. Reflections and learnings were drawn out and analyzed utilizing my critical thinking, grounded in my deep understanding of the context. These reflections and learnings consequently served as an input into the ensuing actions and processes, and again followed the reflection and analysis cycle until the process generated the desired results. It is this dimension of the methodology which formed the backbone of the whole study.

Limitations of the Study

I have identified several limitations for this action research. First this project was only confined to a community dominantly inhabited by Christian migrant settlers, as these people were severely affected during the 2008 armed conflict. Discussions to generate views, opinions and ideas of other demographics (such as the business community, other religious communities, the indigenous people, and the Bangsamoro people themselves) were not reflected in this paper.

Second, throughout the duration of the study there was only one opportunity to consult with the MILF peace panel. There were no additional follow-up discussions with the panel within the specified period of the action research project. It is therefore a possibility that findings generated from this action research may be in danger of being too general and overlooking some of the more specific and detailed findings. With regards to the government panel several efforts were made to reach out to its members but unfortunately to no avail.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND BACKGROUND

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of Change

According to Shapiro (2005), the theory of change is defined by the causal processes which are logically understood to solicit change as a result of programmatic strategies and actions. It examines in depth the practitioner's perceptions of individual, intergroup, and social (or systemic) change and how this occurs. Theory of change also specifies short-term, intermediate and long term goals, wherein it outlines intended effects that directly impact change at the individual, relational and structural levels (Shapiro, 2005: 2). However of the many parts of this concept the element most relevant to this study is that change is both dynamic and constant.

Looking towards the theory of change within SALAM we must look at the organizations core principal. This is to develop innovative programs and approaches which help resolve conflicts, prevent violence, and promote more cooperative relationships between groups. As an organization we strive to be aware of how we perceive change to occur, and thus are able to evaluate more effectively (and ensure that) the intervention strategies actually impact change. For example, viewing our commitment to the region as long-term SALAM envisions the community-driven development interventions which it is implementing in conflict-affected areas as the starting point of initiate broader change.

The abovementioned premise in combination with SALAM's constant interaction with people, policies, laws and systems has led to the ongoing need to develop organizational capacity for critical thinking. Coming to understanding the theory of change concept through this project, we have been made to question the effectiveness of our approach to addressing the issues and their causal roots. This reform was also motivated strongly by the poor conditions observed at the community level, particularly – of course – by the great need for a mechanism to feedback their views, opinions and grievances to the negotiating parties of the peace process.

This leads us to discuss Lederach's (2003) notion of process-structures as platforms for change. According to him the process taking place now, along with the development interventions undertaken in the communities, is but a normal step in the evolution of our organization. We have identified that the overall journey is one which aims to create a development body that is dynamic, adaptive, and changing, whilst also embodying one which maintains a functional structure and can respond creatively to immediate needs. This is a transformation which has been constantly occurring throughout this project (parallel to ongoing SALAM projects), and as such has posed a significant challenge. While this has certainly been difficult – but not impossible – to undertake, it reminds us that change, like life, is never static (Lederach, 2003).

Peace Building Framework as a Process for Conflict Transformation

There are many approaches to instigating change and they can be applied differently according to the conflict situation. While it is true that instituting fundamental change in social structures is extremely difficult, the reality is that the structural and systemic problems in question are often a central cause of protracted and intractable conflicts. Indeed, it is fair to say that any set of institutions or social relationships that deny the identity, social recognition, autonomy, or preconditions for human development definitely creates an environment of conflict. Furthermore, structural conflict is likely to result whenever patterned social relationships fail to satisfy basic needs or secure vital human interests (Maiese, 2003: 3). Any society that aspires to meet the needs of its citizens, deal with serious social problems and avoid violent conflict must address these issues. Needless to say, the results of the mired GPH-MILF peace talks have translated into intractable but intermittent (often violent) conflict in Mindanao. There is no sense of ownership because of decreased participation in significant decision-making, especially of the players who have a major stake in the process – the peoples and the communities.

This approach to peace building is best described by Lederach's 'peacebuilding pyramid', (Lederach, 1997) which regards the GPH-MILF peace process as a top level negotiation that only involves the top-ranking leadership (i.e. key political, military and religious leaders in the conflict). They are the primary representatives of their constituencies and are therefore highly visible. However, a negative consequent is that by virtue of this high profile they are often locked into firm positions regarding the conflict's substantive issues. Therefore the parties are forced to maintain an image of strength, which makes it difficult for them to accept anything less than their publicly stated goals (Maiese, 2003:1). The grassroots leaders representing the masses – who oftentimes experience the day-to-day struggle for safety in

violence-torn areas and who witness first-hand the deep-rooted animosities of the conflict – are neglected from this process. This is a grave mistake as many of the conditions which generate conflict (such as social and economic security, political discrimination and human rights violations) are experienced primarily at the grassroots level.

According to Francis (2002:27) many acknowledge the importance of embracing conflict as both the agent and outcome of change, and recognize the demands of justice and the realities of power. Galtung (1990) sees conflict as a dynamic process in which structure, attitudes and behavior are constantly changing and influencing one another. As the conflict dynamics develop it becomes a manifest conflict, to which parties' interests clash and the likelihood of violent conflict increasingly inevitable. In practice this can be seen to have occurred so extensively that when the 2008 attack took place, attitudes and demeaning stereotypes deepened between the Muslims and Christians. It was apparent that emotions such as fear, anger, rage and bitterness were so strong, especially from the Christians side.

On the other hand, the struggle for right to self-determination (RSD) of the MILF is a struggle for Bangsamoro's identity and security as a people and state, which according to Burton (1990) is the core of basic human needs. The quest to satisfy needs according to him is the basic drive for human motivations and behavior; they will be pursued by all available means, often seemingly irrationally and against all odds. Using this framework we can identify the Supreme Court's (SC) decision to issue a TRO against the MOA-AD of the MILF as a failure to meet such needs. This action led to disappointment and frustration amongst many members of the MILF and ultimately led to the attacks.

Multi-Track Diplomacy

Just as conflict transformation and peace building focus on understanding systems of change, Diamond and McDonald (1996) conceived the multi-track diplomacy model to understand the paths to achieving peace. In their view no one track is more important than or independent from the others; instead they operate together as a system, with different levels of influence at different times and over different aspects of the situation. This model is also referred to as systems approach, of which one of its categories is social peace building and approaches peace through a human element. This stresses the importance of dealing with the emotions of conflict, and frames the importance of supporting community leaders. It is believed that through the provision of skills and tools these individuals may be used as an effective method for violence prevention and/or the prevention of

further escalation. Social peace building, it is stated, also means working with the heart (McDonald, 2003:1).

This model is also supported by Encarnacion, et. al (in Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005: p. 23) who have elaborated on the models of third party-party intevention. They hypothesize that external parties may come to be core parties as their level of involvement increases, thereby making them an "embedded party" who plays a key role in expediting moves towards conflict resolution. In this context SALAM considers itself as an insider and "embedded" within the conflict system. It has been building capacities of the people and communities through psycosocial inteventions, traversing the various levels from the grassroots to the top ranking negotiators. As SALAM evolves from these foundations it will be able to better define its niche, and thus contribute to managing conflict more sustainably.

Communication for Social Change

Social change is an ongoing process that can be spontaneous or instigated. There is a widespread awareness in the field of development communication that community participation is a valuable end in itself, as well as a means to better life (Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, 2002: 5). The communication for social change model is a map of how social change can happen through a process of community dialogue, ultimately affecting the welfare of communities as a whole (Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, 2002: 6). The model describes a dynamic, iterative process that starts with a "catalyst/stimulus" which can be external or internal to the community. This catalyst leads to dialogue within the community and, when effective, this leads to collective action and the resolution of a common problem.

For social change a model of communication is required that is cyclical, relational and leads to an outcome of mutual change (rather than one-sided, individual change); this is where we see the opportunity to employ feedback mechanisms (Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, 2002: 9). Working within this context, my organization's initiative in drawing out issues and feeding-back to the appropriate negotiating parties serves as an impetus (or catalyst/stimulus) in changing the mind set and relationships between SALAM and the community. In addition this action can help effect changes in the perceptions and views of the community, and deepen the appreciation and understanding of differing cultures – i.e. Bangsamoro vis-à-vis the majority Christian settlers. Although most of those working on development communication agree that social change cannot easily fit into a rigidly structured model, some systematic approach and structure is needed.

BACKGROUND

Mindanao has been cloaked with conflict and violent situations, oftentimes attributing this to the historical Bangsamoro struggle for right to self-determination which has been regarded as a struggle for generations (Alim, 1995:1). This resulted in more than four decades of intermittent conflict that destroyed infrastructure, displaced populations, deferred development, and engendered mistrust within communities and between communities (World Bank, 2006: 32). Many writers describe this conflict as the 'Mindanao Conflict'.

Lanao del Norte is one of the provinces in Mindanao that is not spared of conflict phenomenon, in fact, traces of intractable conflict occurred in this place dating back in 1970's where conflict can be attributed to the ferocious and bloody conflict between the para-military forces, the "Ilaga"[1] and "Barracuda"[2] . Both are considered private armies and somewhat associated with some fanatical cults practices, with the "Ilaga" associated with Christians while the "Barracuda with the Muslims. The strengthening of both groups that time was attributed by the backing up of local political warlords. Traces of these groups are still felt in Lanao del Norte and some conflict-affected places in Mindanao. Revival of this group was felt around the conflict-affected communities during the 2008 armed conflict.

The All-Out War in 2000

When Joseph Estrada took over as President in 1998, civil society was not quite sure how his administration would deal with the Moro agenda in Mindanao. A series of events in March 2000 ultimately made the government adopt a policy of all-out war against the MILF. On March 16, the MILF forces occupied the town hall of Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Stung by this daring maneuver the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) retaliated, and the ensuing battle paralyzed Mindanao (Gaspar, Lapad, & Maravillas, 2002: p.112). The residents in these villages were forced to flee to neighboring towns to seek refuge, there was an escalation of acts of violence, and threats to the lives and security of civilians. After President Estrada declared an "all-out-war" against the MILF, he bowed out of office with the "war" unfinished. This led to the total military occupation of Camp Abubakar.[3]

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[1] "Ilaga", a Visayan term for rat, is a vigilante group organized by the Christian politicians and the military. Known to be ferociously anti-Moro.

[2] "Barracuda" is a kind of big fish and the Moro counterpart of the "Ilaga" vigilante group. Organized and backed up by Moro politicians and warlords.

[3] Camp Abubakar was the major and sophisticated camp of the MILF situated in the town of Barira, Lanao del Sur. It was named after Abubakar, the first successor of Prophet Muhammad. It was not only a camp, but was made into a model of a society that the MILF wanted to establish for the people. It occupied an area of 10,000 hectares, but its control extended to an area of approximately 100 square kilometers.

After the ouster of President Estrada, in 2001 President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo re-established the peace process with the MILF, resulting in the 2001 Tripoli Agreement, which lay the framework for peace talks between the Philippine Government and the MILF. These covered the topics of security, rehabilitation and development, and ancestral domain.

In 2003, an agreement on the security aspect of the GPH-MILF peace process was reached and a Cessation of Hostilities agreement was forged with ceasefire mechanisms put in place. In 2005, an agreement on the rehabilitation and development aspect was reached and the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) was established to begin donor assisted projects, while a final agreement was negotiated. Throughout this entire period efforts were extended to forge ahead on the third and most difficult aspect of this peace process, Ancestral Domain. However this has proven to be the most difficult and elusive point of discussion.

The MILF Attack in 2008

The Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD)[4] is the final peace agreement of the GPH-MILF peace process. It took eleven years in the making to forge its blueprint. It was on August 5, 2008 in Malaysia that this was supposedly signed between the two negotiating panels, but the agreement was suspended quickly because of a temporary restraining order (TRO) issued by the Supreme Court of the Philippines.

Even before the rumored signing of the MOA-AD the agreement had already been meted out by various dissenting parties, especially the Mindanao settlers. Protests and demonstrations were staged in various locations to air out these opposing views. Adding to the tension, the TRO explicitly stated that the MOA-AD was unconstitutional, and this was the motivating factor for a series of attacks staged by several MILF commanders in Mindanao (these members had been skeptical since the start of the peace process). Tens of thousands of people were affected by this bout of conflict.

The August attack was considered as one of the most impulsive moves of the rouge MILF members, and as a direct consequence resulted in the signing of the MOA-AD being aborted. The incident claimed almost one hundred lives due to massacres and

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[4] This Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) is a document of understanding between the MILF and the GRP that consists of statements agreed upon by consensus between the peace panels of both parties. It deals with Concepts and Principles, Territory, Resources, Governance of the Ancestral Domain of the Bangsamoro. This MOA is not the final peace agreement between the GPH and MILF but is a crucial step towards the formal talks and the final peace accord.

indiscriminate firing. It disrupted the peoples' economic base and resources, held hostage many residents, burned down countless houses, and saw people's household possessions and livestock looted or destroyed. While the attack only concentrated on three barangays the terror was seen to permeate around the neighboring municipalities and towns, and resulted in tens of thousands of people evacuating out of panic and fear. In essence, the violence shrouded the whole province.

This situation called on LGUs, government agencies, NGOs and various humanitarian organizations to conduct a series of relief operations for the affected families and communities. SALAM was one of these responding organizations.

The Current Situation of the Peace Process

Following the issuance of the TRO by the Supreme Court in 2008, both negotiating parties have reconstituted their respective negotiating panels. Towards the last months of 2009 the MILF has drafted its own version of Peace Agreement dubbed the Comprehensive Compact[5], and the document was made public in January 2010. Though the peace process is currently heading in an apparently definable and progressive direction, the situation remains so fragile that anything is still a possibility. To better reflect on the situation we can refer to the diagram below.

Figure 2: Progression of Conflict
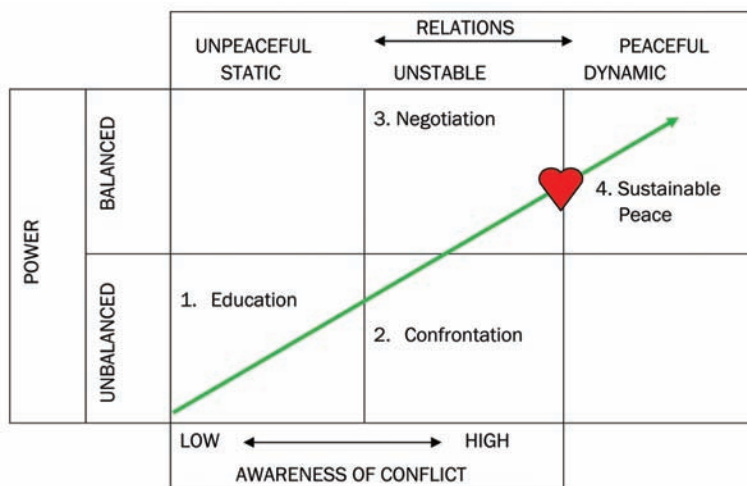
Adapted from: Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall (2005)

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[5] Comprehensive Compact is the proposal of the MILF to the GPH in lieu of the MOA-AD, the original peace agreement that was scrapped in 2008. The draft proposal consisted at least 90% of the original contents of the MOA-AD.

The situation of Mindanao right after the 2008 incident can be considered in between square 3 (negotiation), and square 4 (sustainable peace) – the heart between these two squares is given to denote the situation. While negotiations between the MILF and the Government are on-going, we have seen several highlights taking place which suggest actual movement towards sustainable peace. For example, the reconstitution of both panels with the inclusion of representative of an Indigenous People from the MILF side; the re-establishment of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) which has expanded to include Japan; the creation of the International Contact Group (ICG) which underscored the representation of NGOs; and so on.

Although the situation is still extremely delicate both panels appear to embrace the prospect of peace. They are attempting to maintain the situation, and have not been hindered by significant organizational setback. Moreover there is a trend occurring in the peace process which has not been seen before; many of its activities and topics are being conceal. While there is a positive example of transparence through consultations which have taken place (to give the opportunity to freely critique and comment on the Comprehensive Compact), much greater transparency is needed.

Just before the end of President Arroyo's term the Government Peace Panel and the MILF Panel declared that they had reached points of consensus for an Interim Agreement, with a view of moving towards a negotiated political settlement supported by the Comprehensive Compact. The Parties: considered a new formula that permanently responded to the legitimate aspirations of the Bangsamoro people and built on prior consensus points achieved; deliberated new modalities to end the armed hostilities; reframed the consensus points on Ancestral Domain, taking into account in particular the rights of indigenous people; and incorporated in the compact the agreements on the cessation of hostilities, security arrangement guidelines, and development and rehabilitation initiatives.

Meanwhile, I have been embarking on community driven development projects (CDD) in one of the war-torn communities, seeking to address the social, economic and psychological ramifications of war. Our projects have been working with the people and communities affected by conflict. Together with the staff members working on this project, we have come to realize that for quite some time the victims have endured violent conflict yet nobody has ever listened to their stories. As such – and as key stakeholders – they urgently need to be able to share their opinions of the conflict and the peace process. In addition to this need, they are presently feeling that the changed context is one where development and conflict resolution is possible.

WORK CONTEXT

SALAM is a non-government organization based in Iligan City, Lanao del Norte. It is an organization that works on issues around peace building, conflict transformation and poverty alleviation. Established in 2007, SALAM is still in its fledgling stage with regard to fully integrating the foundations of peace building and conflict transformation into its structures. Even so the organization is currently implementing several development initiatives, specifically projects in the field of emotional recovery and trauma healing, community-based peace dialogue, peace education and socio-economic projects. SALAM believes that through these projects it will enable the people to better cope with the conflict situation.

These initiatives were undertaken in the three gravely affected barangays within the two municipalities in Lanao del Norte, namely: Barangays Tacub and Libertad, situated in the municipality of Kauswagan and Barangay Tabigue, situated in the municipality of Kolambugan. Somehow, through these interventions peace has stabilized in the area, the community has become empowered, the relationship between Muslims and Christians improved, resiliency of the people increased and the community's economic needs augmented.

While at the community, I oftentimes heard the perceived reasons and factors why there was such as strong reaction to the aborted signing of the MOA-AD back in 2008. Many of the answers were "they have not consulted us", "we don't know what they're talking about", "the two negotiating panels are not transparent", "people don't want to be included in the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE)[6]", "I don't want that the Moro will take my land", "no information about what's going on in the peace process", amongst others. Apparently, these answers are a series of reflections which speak of the lack of a mechanism to transmit the people's wants, desires, ideas, opinions and views pertaining to their stake in the peace process. There was no "transmission belt" or mechanism established that could channel these voices and articulate the communities' concerns to the higher level of the negotiating parties.

After hearing this from the communities I reflected on my own organization. After consideration I realized that as we stood, we did not have the ability to process and

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[6] Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) is the territorial claim stipulated in the MOA-AD where they will have political control and governance. It includes the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the municipalities of Balo-i, Munai, Nunungan, Pantar, Tagoloan and Tangkal in the province of Lanao del Norte. Furthermore, include another 700 barangays if decided through a plebiscite within 12 months only if the agreement has been signed.

transmit this feedback from the communities to the negotiating parties. SALAM is an organization working in the field, and I found it strange that we could not bridge the gaps and represent the voices of the conflict-affected people.

CHAPTER FOUR
DATA COLLECTION

My research questions are focused on developing and integrating a mechanism that would adequately represent the community's voice and their stake in the ongoing peace process. I will explain here the three cycles of my action research that explore these. The first cycle dealt with the organization's views, insights and perspective, and the interactions that took place. In this cycle, I held a meeting with staff and colleagues, and a separate meeting with the BOT members. The second cycle delved into the interactions with the people in the community. The third cycle dealt with the actual exchanges and interactions with the MILF peace panel.

First Cycle. Consultation and Meeting with Staff, Colleagues and BOT Members

1.1 Presentation of the Plan and Working with Colleagues

The main objective of this cycle was for me to present my action research proposal to my staff and colleagues. This was aimed to generating views, insights and perspective regarding the proposed change I want to instigate within the organization. I posed challenging questions which were divided between organizational statute and mandate, and the current interventions we have in the community (the CDD).

It felt good to know that the organization's sense of being and existence is still relevant (at least in our context) amidst these changing times. The vision, mission and goals of the organization were fully grasped, understood and shared amongst us. The articulation and elaboration of the staff and colleagues gave testament to this fact. Indeed, the interventions in the community through the development projects had started at a perfect time to create the shared mindset of moving the organization in this new direction. The timing of this motivation to change direction was also favorable, as almost all the development organizations in the area were undertaking extremely similar initiatives.

When almost all development organizations are addressing the same issues on social, physical and psychological repercussions of war, I was encouraged to

reflect on what makes SALAM unique. I settled on the idea that the organization needed to gear itself towards laying down the foundations for peace building. The development projects embarked in the communities lack the elements and fundamentals to fully foster conflict transformation, and this needed to change. This feeling was validated by one colleague when he said these lines during the meeting, which were captured in my research journal (Research Journal, April 20, 2011):

"We are implementing development projects just like what other organizations are doing. Do we make any difference from other organizations? We should make SALAM a unique organization e.g. facilitates peace process, sponsor peace study, etc., implement programs and projects which are not commonly done by other organizations."

At the time he was grinning so he did not appear serious, but I knew he truly meant this. On the other hand I also realized that the interventions embarked in the community has already sown the seed for peace building – it was designed to address the underlying causes of conflict, to take into account the context and looking into the causal attitudes and behaviors. But still I feel something is lacking and I shared the same notion as my grinning colleague. As I elaborated on the issue, they all came to understand and feel the same.

Notwithstanding with the positive design and outcomes of the development initiatives which SALAM had undertaken, I also had to acknowledge that CDD by nature is short-lived. As peace requires a long-term focus in order to lay down the foundations sustainably, it was apparent that the organization must face the immense challenge of moving from one approach to the other.

Based on these realizations I elaborated on the specifics of my action research. Our development initiative were not enough and I settled on the opinion that manifest and violent conflicts that recur in this particular area are oftentimes attributed to the ongoing GPH-MILF peace process. While trying to stabilize the situation with development interventions, I believed that it was an urgent need to hear what the people want, the issues and concerns which they felt relevant to the peace process, and to ask them how to sustain peace in their area. As SALAM has worked in these communities for more than a year now I felt this was the perfect time for SALAM to revolutionize itself and embed within its system a method of feeding-back the community voices. Hopefully, by shifting the community members from spectators to participants in the peace process, we would help sustain the "peaceful" situation in the area.

I felt happy that indeed my views and opinions were positively accepted and well understood by my staff and colleagues. Without a doubt, this only proves that a concept well-presented and understood begets positive feedback. Reflections with regards to this were written in my research journal (Research Journal, April 20, 2011):

"I was happy that my colleagues accepted, understood and challenged with the issue I posed questions pertaining to SALAM's role in the community; being the entity that will bring about the community's issues and concerns pertaining to the social, physical and psychological repercussions of armed conflict that incessantly wreak havoc on their lives. The acceptance was seen and felt by me and that indeed SALAM needs to level up and develop its niche in the field of peace building more, so that it can work with the conflict-affected community. What was more fulfilling on my part was the fact that my colleagues helped me shaped the process I went through with their inquiries. Undeniably, the concept and the process was quite new for them. They had guidance on how to effect the change within the organization, however, and the visual aid that I used on multi-track diplomacy (where it illustrated the various tracks in negotiation and mediation) paved way for a substantial and extensive discussion among us. Indeed, there was clarity of the concept".

With this, we figured out together how to present the plan during the upcoming meeting of the BOT members. We had a clear and common understanding, and we acknowledged that SALAM had limitations. This required SALAM to adapt and develop a niche.

1.2 Meeting with the Board of Trustees (BOT)

This occurred during one of the periodic scheduled meetings of the Board, wherein updates and developments of the projects are discussed. A couple of weeks prior to the meeting I had prepared an executive summary that provided the information and status of projects and their implementation. I sent this in advance to each member of the BOT for them to get apprised of what has been happening to the project, its strengths and weaknesses and the problems encountered in the process. I also prepared the agenda where I added the discussion of my action research proposal as the last agendum. I did this purposely so that ample time would be allotted in the discussion and for me to profoundly explain my proposal. I even shared the executive report with my colleagues to gather their comments prior to sending it to the BOT members. So far, I got no written comments from my colleagues; yet they commended the report I made.

I was requested to facilitate the meeting. When I reviewed the agenda at the start of the meeting I asked for their approval to talk about the research project. One the time arose, I first narrated to them what had transpired during the meeting with the staff and then started presenting my action research proposal by giving them the rationale of SALAM's interventions in Brgy. Tacub. I told them that SALAM's being and existence is relevant in our present context with the present interventions, as through the CDD had alleviated the tough situations of the people. Through these positive impacts, I explained, we have developed a common understanding and to some extent these interventions had enabled the community to cope better with the conflict situation. I also emphasized that this situation had provided SALAM the opportunity to learn and know the various problems in the community; problems that are oftentimes related to or resulting from the ongoing GPH-MILF peace process.

I shared our belief that SALAM's initiatives were similar to those of other development organizations, and this made us realize that the organization was making no difference at all. Crucially the organization had not fully integrated the essential elements needed to foster conflict transformation, despite the fact that SALAM is situated in a fragile situation where violent conflict may recur anytime, anywhere. Brgy. Tacub had been a perennial victim of this pervasive conflict yet there was never an instance where the people were asked about their views, insights and perspectives with regards to their stake in the ongoing peace process.

Overall during the staff meeting there was a collective understanding that the feedback mechanism needed to be developed, and that SALAM should attempt to undertake this, facilitated by my action research. However, I was brought to a halt when Mabel[7], one of the members made this remark. Her lines just caught me, which I captured in my research journal (Research Journal, April 30, 2011):

"The mere presence of SALAM in this particular area through the development projects already conveys a message that indeed the organization had understood and empathized their predicament, we could represent the community and the people to bring out their voice, their views, what they want and what we want – we can tell that to the MILF. I think that is what we ought and must do, and I know we can do more than that".

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[7] Secretary of the Board of Trustees who is also the Vice-President for Katawhang Migrante (Migrant Settlers) of the Mindanao Peoples Peace Movement (MPPM), a Mindanao-wide peace movement based in Cotabato City, Mindanao.

Having said this, she also concurred to what I had mentioned earlier and somewhat turned directed the challenged back to me and the organization. I observed that they recognized and accepted the realities that our organization is facing, and will have to face given its limitations amidst this complex conflict situation. At this moment I was feeling that this new goal is within the bounds of the organization's mandate; it was then that she added these lines which I also captured in my research journal (Research Journal, April 30, 2011):

"You, being the Executive Director and wherein the power and authority has been vested upon, know best how to lead and where to bring the organization. As long as the organization is trekking within the bounds of its mandate, you can decide what is the best within your capacity, since you know more than us what has been happening on the ground".

This comment made me more confident and strengthened my conviction that indeed I am on the right track with my action research project. At the same time I felt that a profound yet challenging responsibility was laid on my shoulder. I felt that I need to create or look for circumstances that should practically drive the organization to be a channel of feedback for these people who have lived so long with insecurity, and who long for justice and a peaceful life.

At that moment I was aware that the seed has already been sown and we just have to nurture it so that it will flourish. From here, I think and I feel what is equally important is to create space for dialogue which aims at fostering understanding rather than agreements or solutions which not only are concerned with one's own position, but also with the other party and the position that the party holds (Maiese, 2003: p. 2).

Second Cycle: Dialogue with the Community Residents

For this cycle I conducted a focus group discussion with the people in Brgy. Tacub. The purpose was to extract their views, insights and perspective towards the ongoing GPH-MILF peace process. 31 people attended the meeting that comprised 26 women and 5 men. All of them had benefited from the services extended by SALAM, spanning from education and training, psychosocial services and livelihood projects.

Before we started, I presented the objectives and the purpose of having this activity. This was very important because in the past they have had experienced (though not with SALAM) a FDG held on questionable grounds. They were told

to sign for a registration/attendance which they were told for the organization's documentation, but they knew that the paper was used to support for a petition which called for military withdrawal from their area. For them, it really was a big issue because that time (some few months after the attack) a military camp was established nearby which made them feel safe and protected. They were happy with the establishment of the military camp.

Being cautioned with this previous incident, I explained to them that the attendance sheet with their respective signatures on it was only needed for SALAM's documentation. I was careful to explain the exact purpose of this record so as to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

I also encouraged them to freely voice out their ideas and feelings on issues that had been bottled up for so long. Throughout the interactions of the FDG I observed that a number of similar past personal issues were ventilated, and these eventually led the discussion to the 2008 staged attack. Among the issues were injustices, human rights violations, arbitrary arrest and killing, direct violence, hostage taking, marginalization of their role in the peace process and the issue of being the interminable victims of the violent conflict recurring in the area. It made me realized that people with suppressed feelings about their traumatic past experiences cannot get integrate well with the other people and had the difficulty to move on. According to Fisher, et.al, (2000:115) if dissenting voices and deeply held grievances cannot be heard and addressed, these can turn into future violent conflict. Undoubtedly, the emotional recovery and trauma healing activities provided by SALAM helped begin to heal their grievances and emotional anxieties. Because there was such lively sharing by the participants this meeting was very fruitful.

As the discussion progressed more practical and challenging issues surfaced, and some of these were expressed in an emotional manner showing that they felt deeply on these issues. Since the issues touched the core of their being, it is obvious that they need to be addressed. Some of the questions and comments which I found particularly challenging were: "Can we ask justice to what had happened to our relatives, to our children, to our husband, to our lives?" "Who should be responsible and held liable for what happened?" "I hope that the incident won't happen again since it's so difficult to leave things behind and re-established our source of living". I know how hard it is to cope with losing loved ones, so I know that for them it must be very tragic and difficult to overcome.

At the same time I observed that with this small event we held – where people were given and afforded the full recognition of being a significant player and

stakeholder in the peace process – the participants truly felt important. The results were astounding. While the issues presented were not "new," the optimism and the courage to seek a better way of resolving them was incredible. From this I am learnt that all that was needed was for me to create the space; after that the people take initiative to use the space by actively engage in the meaningful dialogue.

With that willingness and warm response afforded to me by the community residents, I have come to agree with the belief that true community participation is indeed a valuable end in itself, as well as a means to better life (Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, 2002: p. 2). I also believe that social change can happen through a process of such community dialogue leading to collective action. This is a process by which a dialogue as a participatory form of communication becomes a form of collective action that is cyclical and relational (Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, 2002: p. 11). Based from what they expressed I learned that certainly these issues need to be brought out in the open, to be articulated in front of the appropriate people, and in a proper setting. At the end of the day, I wrote this reflection in my journal (*Research Journal, May 8, 2011*):

"The people, being at the grassroots level must be involved. The talks must be transformed and should be a tripartite talk – the government, the MILF and the community people. How to have direct participation by groups who neither are pro-MILF nor pro-government is going to be a challenge as it is in the nature of conflict to make sure that people are polarized to be part of one party or the other. But it can be done and needs to be done. And certainly, this is a big daring, challenging issue. People's direct participation can clarify and support the formal peace negotiations. It also strengthens the negotiations and gives it legitimacy. Meanwhile, still the challenge is there for me: How to create an opportunity where all these articulated issues can be brought out in the open right before the concerned negotiating panel."

Third Cycle. Consultation with the MILF Peace Panel

This was an event that literally translated SALAM as a representative of the people, being able to feedback the peace and conflict issues from the ground to the negotiating panel of the MILF. I felt that this event was, to an extent, providential as it happened seemingly by luck while I was implementing the last part of my action research project. As mentioned previously this is the cycle of my project which was not planned for initially, however as the opportunity was there I never had a second thought about included it into my research process.

The activity was termed: "Consultation with the MILF Peace Panel with the Non-Moro NGOs, CSOs, POs, Church Groups, and Indigenous tribes in Mindanao". All the six male members of the peace panel were present during the session, and I represented my institution as well as the community at large. Overall for me this ongoing dialogue (which was initiated by the MILF) was a unique opportunity for the Mindanaoans[8] to take part in shaping the viable and sustainable political options to resolve the root causes of armed conflict. During the meeting the panel had discussed the salient points of the document where each issue/theme was divided between them. After this came the question and answer portion.

Some of the questions raised were related to the land ownership of the migrants and indigenous peoples, religious freedom, governance and territory of the future Bangsamoro sub-state, Shariah Law, Abu Sayyaf, and kidnapping. I also raised quite few questions mostly clarifying the issues that were talked about by the community residents, for example: justice to the residents who were killed in August 2008 attack; governance, territory, rights and ownership over the resources within the claimed territories, and; security, especially now that the peace talks are entering a critical stage. Unfortunately I was a bit emotional when clarifying the issue of justice, and it appeared that one of the panel members felt it was an indemnification for the lives lost during the attack. I believe he did not like the way I stated my point and became overly defensive. I his response in my research journal (Research Journal, June 11, 2011):

"Justice? Who have been denied of justice here?(pause for a while)..you are also part to be blamed for what had happened. Had it not been with your immediate reaction about the MOA-AD which I know maybe few or perhaps none of you here have read it all in its entirety, that thing would not happen. Speaking of justice? We just want to take back what has been taken from us, long, long time ago."

After saying this, the whole conference room was dumbfounded. I observed that everyone was reflecting on what he said, while I also saw some people frowning and heard them mumble as if they wanted to disagree with his opinion. I also felt the same but preferred not to comment on the point because I knew that he (the panel member) will continue to justify it. At this very moment, my mind flashed back to the activity that we did in the community. I thought what if the people were here? How would they react to his response? What would

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[8] A term that connotes "association" or "sense of belongingness" with people coming from Mindanao

the scenario be? I refrained from arguing as I felt that this was not the proper venue – it was an activity for clarifying issues and giving answers. It was not a facilitating atmosphere but one where the panel would explain, you would listen, then ask questions, and finally they would answer you. A session of this structure doesn't warrant the pouring out of emotions and feelings. Ironically I think this is one of the aspects that is most lack by some, if not all, aspects of the peace process.

The silence was broken when the facilitator asked for another question. I raised another question pertaining to security issue. It's a known fact that one of their ground commanders responsible for the attack in Central Mindanao had defected from the group, formed another group, and had the support of around a thousand armed men. I shared my concern that this could be a spoiler of the peace process. The Peace Panel Chairman assured the crowd that while peace negotiations continue the defected group would not make any move that would derail it. I felt this answer was not an assurance at all because those possible "spoilers" had already defected from the MILF, and as such the MILF have no control over them. I followed-up with a question pertaining to the role of the people and communities which have been affected by the conflict, and most often bear the lion's share of the ensuing burdens. On this basis I continued to explain that this series of consultations was borne in the spirit of dialogue and in response to the call for inclusiveness and participation. Both the migrant settlers and the Bangsamoro community felt that these two qualities are central needs of the peace process.

Another issue which was requested to be raised is that everything pertaining to the peace process was concealed and to demanding for increased transparency, especially in those areas included in the territorial jurisdiction. This developing tradition of concealment was seen to be opposite of what had been happening previously and there was discontent with such conduct. I think this also triggered a rethinking process on the part of the MILF aimed at modifying the approaches to really solving the Moro conflict. Perhaps we are beginning to see the group draw out the wealth of lessons which exist in the extensive protesting by almost all sectors?

While everyone (the government, non-state armed groups, civil society organizations and international organizations) claims to work for and on behalf of the people, it is apparent the people have not been given adequate opportunity to provide input, to be listened to and be heard. While this fact was acknowledged by the Peace Panel, I felt extremely happy to have carried

out just what the community wanted me to do. From this experience I felt that in some little way I put meaning to the challenges they posed to me; however I also acknowledge the fact that this surely is not enough. I also believed that only if constituents are properly informed, handled, and mobilized behind the peace negotiation, there would be a very effective and powerful base of support for our journey to peace. Ultimately this would help reach a just settlement of the conflict in Mindanao.

CHAPTER V
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the various cycles of action and reflection a number of insights and lessons have been drawn out. What has been seen already is that these learnings clearly demonstrate the need for implementing the community feedback mechanism, as well as to integrate this mechanism along with non-threatening communication strategies into the organization itself. However these ideas have been subjected to further analysis using the theoretical framework discussed earlier, and as a result the following themes emerged as significant findings of the study:

Conceptual clarity is important

The way in which a concept is articulated and understood as significant in the theory of change is indeed a paramount element in initiating the process of social transformation. Practically I found this to be true at two levels.

First, within SALAM we have seen that through the above described due process a common understanding was reached on the motivation for and practical design of the feedback mechanism. Following discussion to clarify the central issues which the organization should logically focus on, this intervention was widely accepted as able to facilitate the organization's more effective engagement in a (much needed) process of change. Without a doubt, this situation is truly reflective of Shapiro's (2005) theory of change, which affirms that real-world interventions and strategies are often eclectic and evolving. This theory gives legitimacy to SALAM's current actions (including the development interventions undertaken in the communities) as they are part of the normal evolution of a development organization that is both dynamic and adaptive.

Second, the importance of conceptual clarity was also apparent at the community level. Through clear explanation of the motivation and desired outcomes of the project during the data collection, the community came to realize and understand their significant role and stake in the peace process. As we have discussed earlier, a peace process that is grounded in the spirit of collective dialogue (Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, 2002: p.11), inclusiveness and participation absolutely increases the prospect for sustainable settlement and resolution of the conflict. In my context (where both my work and this project has taken place), the most important factor in initiating change has been to enable the space for discussion

and to facilitate an environment of understanding – two very essential needs for conceptual clarity. Recognizing their importance allowed for a smooth FDG at the community level.

According to Chaitin (2003:2), "it is imperative to consider the feelings of the other person and… [give] respect and legitimacy for the other's opinion" during the communication process. This means that the facilitators of such interactions must be open and honest with potential participants about the aims of the encounter and the use of the resulting materials, making sure that each individual is there of his or her own volition, and that they agree to future use of the content of the meetings. This atmosphere of openness and honesty must continue throughout the interaction. The general feeling of the community meeting conducted for this project was indeed facilitating, and we were lucky that when confusion occasionally arose it was managed effectively. At this point it is important to note that a safe place for communication cannot be created and sustained if the participants have been coerced into taking part in the interpersonal or group dialogue.

Constructive communication is significant to achieve change

One of the issues that challenged me was how to communicate the desired change within the organization? This was particularly because I knew that the change I proposed to effect within the organization was no easy task to accomplish. Nevertheless, I was sure that the only means to achieve such change was to communicate the idea with the people concerned: my staff, colleagues, the BOT members and the community. The process of exchanging views, ideas and opinions between and among the staff, colleagues, BOT members and the community facilitated the communication to be constructive through creating a common, shared vision. According to Francis (2002:127) constructive communication is both a symbolic and practical expression of respect, through which the goal is to build an understanding of the needs and perceptions of the involved parties. Moreover, constructive communication requires emphatic listening and clear but sensitive speaking.

When I sensed that there was an atmosphere of confusion among the staff and colleagues over the concept I revisited and elaborated upon the details, making a great effort to create a substantial and participatory exchange. In my mind it was clearly important for constructive dialogue to occur as it is this which would enable the model to be enacted effectively at a later stage. By revisiting points of confusion in this manner the group would collectively journey through each member's ideas and perceptions, and ultimately this process is what has helped achieve a unified decision. From this experience I embraced the fact that in ever-evolving contexts,

effecting real change – irrespective of how big or small – requires enormous patience and profound determination. Furthermore, in an organizational setting the only way that you can be sure you have created understanding is to listen to the people you are communicating with, and make a special effort to encourage them to reflect back to you what they have heard (and what they make of it.)

I also had similar experience in the community when I conducted the dialogue with them. Based from Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis, (2002:1), constructive communication focused on the expression of needs and perceptions rather than accusations affirms that a cooperative problem-solving approach is being utilized. Undeniably, reflecting on this process I have can confirm the community strong belief in their right to be heard and to voice the issues which affect them in their daily lives. Certainly, this is what is meant when we talk about communication for social change. As mentioned previously this is the element which makes the process a valuable outcome in itself. For example, the act of identifying the community problems, group decision making, collective action and discussing the implementation of plans are critical activities allow the community to grapple with their situation. Through speaking of these topics they share their perception of the logical causes and effects, and identify – not only for the facilitator but also for themselves – the entry points for initiating social change. Moreover this process demonstrates their vast capacity to think critically, their ability to unify and cooperate, and that they are able to decide who they are, what they want and how they will obtain what they want. This is a undebatably a positive outcome, particularly when the group are widely regarded as poor, marginalized and excluded.

Space for exchanging views is essential for mutual trust and building relationships

Creating an appropriate environment is an essential part of allowing the meaningful exchange of views, ideas and messages to take place. Providing the space for survivors of violence to be felt, be heard and have their social and cultural needs taken into account paves the way for healing, and most importantly for the rebuilding of relationships. This is part of what is referred to as a "systems approach to peace," or as social peace building (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). This term specifically refers to an approach to peace which focuses on the human element, targeting the emotions of conflict and preparing a framework for de-escalation and violence prevention accordingly.

Social peace building also means working with the heart (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). The activity conducted in the community provided the people a space where

they could open up their minds and heart, and be able to listen not only to others pain but also to the voices within themselves. As Maiese (2003) stated, the aim of dialogue is to listen, hear and develop a shared understanding of the issues that are being articulated. This is a paramount consideration especially for people who have had tragic experiences and have lived through with trauma for some time.

SALAM's presence in the community paved way to establish a good level of rapport with the people and the community. At the same time my previous work with other organizations had already provided me the opportunity to meet the communities some time ago, and as a result mutual trust and openness has been afforded to me – indeed this is essential in building and sustaining a healthy and respectful relationship. This kind of relational awareness is critical to building peace systems for it encourages the kind of connections, bridges, alliances and networking opportunities that are essential to the ongoing support of the process of change (Diamond, 2011). Because multi-track diplomacy is a systems approach, in which even the intervener is part of the system and the personal level is just as important as the inter-group level, it is essential to consider such relationships the foundation of change. In addition because of the frequent opportunities which SALAM provides for the exchange of views, the organization's role is crucial in striving for peace in the area.

The consultation with the peace panel was the first time such an even had occurred in the area since the 2008 attacks, an accomplishment enabled by continuing to build a good relationship. Although this was my first direct encounter with the panel, I can confidently state that the level of trust held with the party you are seeking to engage is a significant factor in determining the limits of discussion. As our relationship with the group was still to be proven it was of the utmost importance to ensure that the environment and atmosphere created during the consultation was one of mutual respect and openness. By creating this ambience I was able to express the issues in great depth – not my own thoughts but those raised by the community.

Looking towards the larger peace process, we can see that if the setting is not one of openness, honesty and trust it is obvious that many people will continue feel excluded. In addition without relationships characterized by trust the most critical issues will not be able to be raised or adequately addressed. The top level negotiations, by virtue of being high profile, are often grounded on locked position regarding the conflict's substantive issues (which are used to project an image of strength) (Maiese, 2003). Because the negotiation process is usually conducted in the public limelight, top-level leaders face the difficult challenge of maintaining

publicly articulated goals while at the same time moving toward compromise. There is no doubt in my mind that these events could certainly benefit from considering the environment and atmosphere of the meetings in greater detail, drawing upon the lessons discovered during the meeting with the MILF peace panel.

Looking back at the consultation, in my personal assessment the environment – although it was felt to be adequate – could have been much more positive and enabling. The setting was a large conference hall, filled with people who did not know each other well, and this was not a comfortable place for people to speak freely. Adding to the discomfort in the room, although some of the individuals were acquainted with one another many had never met. With this kind of atmosphere there were tendencies for people to guard the most sensitive issues (which are in fact the key issues), rather than air them out in public.

It is also important to note the layered relationships in a conflict setting. While a higher position in the pyramid means greater access to information and more decision-making capacity, it also means that the individual is less affected by the day-to-day consequences of those decisions (Lederach, 1997:43). Conversely, a lower position increases the degree to which individuals directly experience the consequences of decision-making but limits access to decision-making power. These inverse relationships pose difficulties for the design and implementation of peace processes, and reaffirm the need to create a space characterized by openness and trust.

Communicating and articulating needs can be liberating

For the community participants, to articulate their needs, fears, aspirations and dreams (when they felt otherwise voiceless) was seen as a liberating experience, and appeared to result in increased self-respect. This effect also increases the plausibility of finding mutually acceptable solutions to the conflict, as the parties are more self-confident and thus more willing to negotiate. For example, as was observed the friendly environment and open space provided by SALAM to the people in the community built up their confidence, and as a result they became able to express key issues and their rawest feelings. What was most apparent is that the participants indicated that through making these gestures they were provided with a great sense of relief. This, no doubt, confirms the value of communicating one's perceived needs.

Throughout the history of peace processes in Mindanao, transparency has always posed a large issue and its constituents have never had a chance to get to know

the results of what has been happening. This reminded me of a forum which SALAM spearheaded, dubbed "Discussion on Comprehensive Compact." In it the speaker said *"what is the purpose of having a negotiation when everything else is already transparent… no need to negotiate"*. Making sense of this I believe the meaning to be that the community and people – who are supposed to be the heart of the peace process – should know where they stand and what is at stake, rather than being left behind through a lack of consideration. This is what Lederach (1997) has underscored: Oftentimes negotiations and peace processes focus on the representatives of the conflicting groups rather than on effecting the processes of structural change, perhaps because the peace building framework which seeks to reduce direct violence and produce social and economic justice is not adequately adapted to the context (Lederach, 2007). Thus, in practice there persists a deeply felt perception in many people's minds (especially those directly affected by violence) that peace compromises social justice.

Intractable and long-term conflicts have been known to lead to autistic communication – a state in which there is virtually no communication between the sides and each group becomes even more entrenched in its prejudices and preconceptions. This leads to a vicious cycle of silence and recrimination (Chaitin, 2003), which in turn makes it very difficult for open communication and dialogue to occur. Moreover, over time these perceptions and feelings intensify and lead to further misunderstanding and negative attitudes, sometimes even causing people to shut down.

Recognizing and accepting limitations is a driver of change

This project hoped to initiate a process which would contribute to the mainstreaming of peace building and conflict transformation in my context – in essence to plant and nurture a transformative seed so that it may flourish in the future. However, manifest conflict is recurring and even worse is that the activities and interventions of both SALAM and the other development organizations in the area are constantly being disrupted. In these conditions it appears that initiatives such as rebuilding relationships, assisting internally displaced people (IDPs) and rehabilitating the physical, psychological and social fabric destroyed by war will be wasted effort. The question then is: how long will these situations last? How long will the people and communities continue to suffer and be re-victimized by the war? How long will they remain spectators of the peace process? How should this situation change in favor for them? How and when will their voice and right to be heard become a reality?

During the project implementation these are the questions which have been reverberating in my mind, and brought me to further analyze the causes and dynamics of conflict, and the system which sustains the ongoing GPH-MILF peace negotiations. This process has led to finding some essential factors which are indeed in need of transforamtion, and which would mean that – apart from the development projects extended in the communities – an organizational refocusing must occur. Specifically we must learn how to transcend from a focus on solely implementing development projects to really 'working on and in' conflict. Hopefully this action may help sustain the struggle for and continued peace in the area.

I know the task ahead is very immense and challenging, yet we can and should start small whenever the opportunity presents itself (and the situation allows). In this case SALAM has started the process of change with an initiative of institutionalizing the feedback mechanisms, and further seeking to identify and bridge the gaps. As Figueroa, Kincaid, Manju, & Lewis (2002) said, a "catalyst or stimulus" can start to initiate actions in the community, even as a body which is external to the community. Although SALAM has only just such work with the community and the MILF peace panel, we strong hope that it will lead to sustained collective action and resolution of common problems within a given timeframe.

CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents the conclusions that have been drawn out from the findings and discussions presented above. Accordingly, included in the following parapgraghs the topcis which have been seen in the paperare measured against the reseach aim and objectives, suggestions and comments on the process at large are given, and finally several recommendations for further action are listed.

Change is pervasive in our life and no matter how great or small, it affects us. As such it is important to understand the context of where change is taking place, and understand the impact on the various levels of oneself – personal, relational and social. The process of developing and integrating the feedback mechanisms within and outside the organization which I undertook has made me understand a key lesson: no matter how big or small the desired outcome, an extraordinary level of determination and perseverance is required. Undoubtedly, it was the appalling situation in the area that compelled SALAM to take up the challenge of changing the predicament of the "ordinary people" who have been confronted with conflict and violence. Overall, grounded on the preceding pages, we can see that this research project has indeed pursued the research aim of developing and integrating a feedback mechanism to bring voices from the ground to the GPH-MILF talks. The extent to which it is effective and sustainable is however a question for further and future study.

In addition to this, effecting the desired change within my organization has provided an opportunity for the staff, colleagues and BOT members to become much more practically involved. Through their own efforts they have learned of how to plan organizational change, understand and influence each other, and enact appropriate and logical interventions.

Another extremely important occurrence which was seen during this project was the active and dynamic participation of the grassroots communities, founded on the spirit of inclusiveness. As these individuals hold a major stake in the peace process, their potential to contribute is an important mechanism in sustaining peace; unfortunately it is also one which until now has been significantly overlooked. From the theory and the practice described in this paper we have seen that a community centered and people-centered peace process is the best possible framework (and one which should not be considered alternative). Amongst other

factors this is because grassroots leaders are often the firsthand witness to the deep-rooted hatred and animosities associated with the conflict.

What has also been shown is that building mutual trust is significant in building relationships; this is an invaluable principal to embrace because relationships are the heart and veins of peace building. It is practically extremely challenging to build and rebuild broken relationships across the lines of division which have been created through and by the conflict. Based on Lederach's (1997) pyramid, the GPH-MILF peace process is a clear manifestation of fostering horizontal relationships. Community people meet community people, mid-range leaders often see only each other and of course top level political leaders always sit across the negotiation tables. In other words there is a significant gap in the development of vertical relationships in this context, and therefore building relationships across the different players and actors in the pyramid is an activity of paramount importance (specifically through developing mutual respect and understanding between higher levels of leadership with grassroots communities and vice versa). While the theory is apparent and logical, we face a much more complicated reality on the ground: developing the recognition that peace building involves multiple activities at different levels of leadership, taking place simultaneously, each level interdependent but also distinct in its effects.

Certainly this paper has observed it is truly liberating to be able to articulate and freely express needs, aspirations and issues – especially those which have been held for a long time – directly to negotiating parties. Yet the capacities of major peace stakeholders, peace building practitioners (both governmental and non-governmental) and other players are still to be considerably enhanced. (This is a statement which rings true not only in this field but across a wide range of activities.) Most importantly, this is only one criterion for improvement across the peace building field; it is also important to broaden the general understanding of peace building as a valid intervention and seek to integrate the fields of conflict transformation, restorative justice and socio-economic development. Only through such a holistic approach can the fundamental issues which gave rise to conflict be addressed, while providing enough space for the stakeholders' active political participation.

Organizationally, through this project SALAM rightfully acknowledged its limitations and constraints. Challenged by the changes unfolding within its working environment, the organization came to see this intiative as a unique opportunity to develop its niche in the field of peace building. What started because of the apparent lack of a mechanism to involve communities in the peace process

at large has acted as a lens for a larger realization – to more deeply yet more accurately engage the roots of conflict through social structures. In the light of the apparent ease in making this shift I know that SALAM has done its part, and I know it will continue to do its part as it continues on the journey with the conflict-affected people. It will be mindful of the changing realities, continue to contribute collective efforts to uphold human decency in every sphere, and this is foundation for its legitimate existence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is a multitude of issues raised in this paper which warrant further action, I have chosen to focus on two recommendations. This is in the hope that the list provided below is not so ambitious as to make it impossible to pursue. Rather it is both realistic and pragmatic, and challenges those in similar sectors in the area to strive to contribute to the struggle for a more effective and inclusive peace process.

First, it is recommended that a similar project is conducted to give space and opportunity for dialogue to other groups, such as businessmen, religious groups, and indigenous people. This will help draw out their views and concerns with regards to the peace process, and thereby provide the foundations for crafting a comprehensive, strategic plan for inclusion and participation. Second, as this project was only able to target the MILF peace panel, I believe it of the utmost urgency to strive for serious consideration of the participation of the GPH panel and their counterparts. Such an action will help generate and make known their views and perspectives regarding the issue, and thus further the goal of fostering mutual understanding and building positive relationships.

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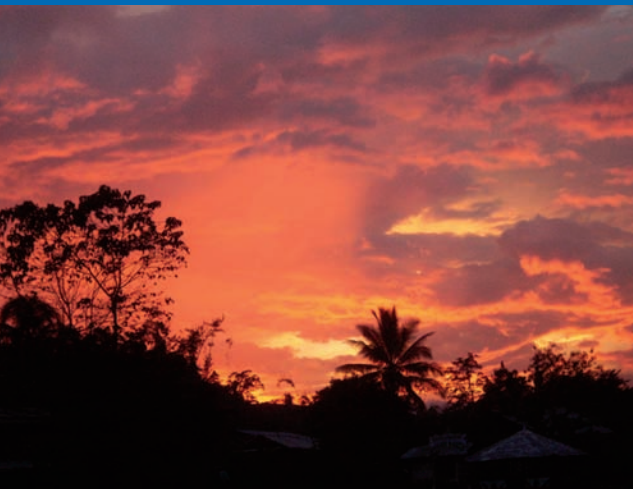
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