

Session 4: Community Development and Human Security– Addressing the Gaps: Comments to the Presentations*

By: Atty. Zainudin S. Malang**

Thank you to the organizers for inviting me to comment on the presentations in this session. Since I work in Mindanao, allow me to comment by correlating the presentations to some of my own observations on best practices and not-so-best practices in addressing gaps in community development and human security.

My first observation is the imperative of local stakeholders to any initiative to address the gaps. The presentations made by Messrs. Alim and Hossain highlights not just the importance but also the indispensability of local stakeholders in addressing these gaps. The reason is that they have the most at stake, they are the ones most familiar with the situation on the ground, and how to deal with it. This is something the aid and donor community must always bear in mind in their attempts to fill in the gaps in community development and human security. Not only must we engage them in program implementation but even more important, we must engage them from the very beginning – in program identification, design and conceptualization. One of the best articulation of this approach is in the paper of Mr. Hossain himself and I quote:

“CDCs identify their own problems and challenges, formulate own strategies and development plans, and then manage, monitor, and implement all projects at the field level.”

In Mindanao, I have seen NGOs and civil society and other local stakeholders express concern that except in the program implementation stage, they are relegated to passive roles by those who come from the outside and impose their brand of peacebuilding.

My second observation I would like to share is that any intervention or initiative to address human security gaps need to proceed from a well-rounded understanding of how those gaps arose in the first place and the environment in which the initiatives will be introduced. Conflict analysis and needs assessment are indispensable and necessary preliminary steps. A lack of or even flawed conflict analysis, prepared without adequate inputs from those primarily affected by human security gaps can lead to serious issues. This is particularly true with respect to gaps brought about by conflict where social-political divides, instead of being addressed as a gap, may manifest itself in the implementation of initiatives intended to address those same gaps. Case in point is the staffing pattern of aid agencies operating in Mindanao where huge human security gaps exist because of an ongoing armed conflict. Study after study have shown that the conflict was bred by social-economic-political marginalization of the minority. In fact, a

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UNDP commissioned opinion poll asking detailed questions among those who comprise the majority in the Philippines showed that almost half of the respondents showed a negative perception of the Moros in Mindanao, even to the extent of denying them employment for no other reason than they don't belong to the majority. And this sentiment runs across the entire strata of Filipino society. And yet for decades since the conflict began, the staffing pattern of many humanitarian and aid agencies in Mindanao show a dearth of consultants and program managers with sufficient familiarity with the conflict, much less people who actually come from the conflict affected area thereby depriving their programs of valuable inputs as well as sensitivity. In one instance I particularly remember, a staff of a humanitarian aid worker told a group of internally displaced persons begging for food to go back to the mountains and find some rootcrops if they wanted food. An official of another major funding agency also questioned the logic of designing an assistance program tailor-made for the conflict affected areas inhabited by the minority.

The other important understanding that we must incorporate in our attempts to address gaps is that of the socio-political environment in which those attempts are being made. Is the conflict ongoing? Or is there a ceasefire? Has a peace agreement been signed? Is the peace agreement in the process of being implemented? Answers to these basic questions must be asked because the appropriateness and viability of programs depend on those answers. I have seen programs designed for a post-agreement situation being implemented in an area still wracked by fighting.

The third observation I would like to share is the need to periodically and earnestly re-evaluate the efficacy not only of programs but also of the frameworks that inform them. I just came from 3 months in Aceh where I participated in a meta-analysis of the reintegration programs of various former combatants for the purpose of identifying the gaps in those programs. In Mindanao, the latest figures on the human development index of the five Bangsamoro provinces show that they continue to be the lowest in the whole country even after a decade of peace and development funds were poured into the area.

Allow me now to share some positive developments in relation to the above concerns that I have raised.

The first positive development is that key actors from the aid and donor community have recognized the need to give greater role to local stakeholders. As Mr. Alim says in his presentation:

“There is now a growing recognition especially from the international community, of the important role that CSOs play in societal reconstruction.”

JICA, for instance, have directly engaged the Bangsamoro Development Agency which was established by agreement by both the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. They have also directly funded Moro NGOs. Previously, funding and assistance to communities passed through institutions where Moros did not have an effective voice. Other agencies have also followed suit. CIDA and USAID, have also undertaken a pro-active hiring of technocrats and professionals from the Moro communities to occupy key responsible positions in their programs. Even Asia Foundation, whose country chief is one of the presenters in the earlier sessions have adopted such an approach.

The second positive development I have noticed is that those who are active in providing peace and development aid are increasingly recognizing the fact that their economic interventions cannot be divorced from the larger peace process. For instance, there was a concerted effort among all the aid agencies last year to exert firm pressure on the government not to launch an all-out military offensive in the areas where they have projects, in recognition of the fact that no peace and development assistance can possibly succeed where there is widespread fighting. The peace process in Mindanao has a history of 3 decades. That period was marked by frustration and false expectations. It is only recently when the international community has taken a more direct and active participation that the peace process has achieved substantial gains towards a sustainable resolution of the conflict. I am pleased to mention here that Japan is one of those countries that have made substantial contributions to the peace process in Mindanao. Let us hope the international community not only sustain but intensify its contribution to the peace process.

The last positive development I would like to share is that more and more attention is being given to the need to attend to the human rights concerns of Moro communities. For years, no one wanted to touch this area because human rights cases were viewed as a political hot potato for aid agencies. But after being reminded by human rights advocates that human security also mean “freedom from fear”, more funding is now being devoted to human rights training.

However, let me just emphasize that human rights assistance to Moro communities is still in its inception stage. There is still a huge imbalance between assistance given to the government's counter-terrorism initiative vis-a-vis assistance to human rights programs. There is still a reluctance to fund legal aid programs to indigents who are subjected to warrantless arrests, torture, and harassment. This should be the core of any human rights assistance and yet the bulk of the funding is given only to conferences and forums.

With this, I end my comment. Thank you again for inviting me as a commentator.