

# **Building Bridges: Interfaith and Peace Education among Women and Children in Mindanao, Philippines**

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## **Introduction**

violence and peacelessness continue to prevail worldwide. These realities affect society as it continues to inflict suffering among the people of various creed and races. Interstate wars and internal armed conflict inflict on the people hunger and deprivation, violations of human rights, discrimination of all kinds, and environmental destruction. Various dimensions of peacelessness are seen in on-going wars in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine, and the Philippines. The root causes of the conflict are complex involving economic, social, cultural and political factors.

Working towards a culture of peace is a great challenge amidst these complex factors. Forging a sense of unity amid cultural diversity may be one way of attaining this goal. Religious and cultural differences continue to be one of the causes of conflicts. While globalization is bringing about greater interdependence, it is also triggering polarization and conflict, thus resulting to the escalation of ethnic tensions. What the world needs now is for dialogue and cooperation to avert this trend. This is the call to safeguard the wellbeing of the present as well as the future.

Like the United Nations peace is the central mandate of UNESCO. The United Nations documents on the culture of peace clearly articulate this. *Disputes and conflicts may be inevitable but violence is not. To prevent the continued cycles of violence, education must seek to promote peace and tolerance, not fuel hatred and suspicion.* UNESCO has enshrined peace in the Preamble of its founding instrument, and it pursues the promotion of peace through its programs on education. As cited in the UNESCO Medium term strategy (2002-2007) (31C/4), *education should promote universally shared values such as human rights, democracy, tolerance, nonviolence, solidarity, intercultural understanding and dialogue among cultures and civilizations.* This is implemented by UNESCO through its educational programs and projects.

The Philippines is internationally recognized for its pioneering efforts in the United Nations in the promotion of interfaith dialogue and cooperation for peace. Two historic international initiatives, namely the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace in 2005 and the resolution on the Promotion of Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, launched by the Philippines in partnership with UNESCO resulted in fruitful outcomes.

The project interfaith and peace education was a result of this partnership. Through the UNESCO National Commission, Ateneo De Zamboanga University, a Jesuit university in Western Mindanao undertook a project of establishing a Center of Interfaith and Peace Education for Women and Children.

**Evaluation of the project or activity implemented :**

- a) Purpose and objectives indicating the original goals or expected outcomes as defined from the outset in the original project;

The goals:

To contribute to peace building and conflict prevention through community-based interfaith and intercultural peace education and advocacy campaign by establishing a venue for dialogue and exchange of ideas among women in conflict areas and developing a Center of interfaith and peace education program

- b) Major results:

The project successfully implemented the following activities:

**Component I: Established a venue for dialogue and exchange of ideas among women in conflict areas.**

Twenty wives of former Moro National Liberation Front combatants, seventeen loved ones of the members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and nineteen Subanen (an indigenous peoples group) women with their clan leader participated in this 2-day interfaith assembly.



A. Interfaith Assembly

*Participants (from opposing sides) share their stories – experiences, feelings, thoughts, and aspirations – on conflict through body imaging. They found out, that they have a common story.*

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- a. *To eliminate religious and ethnic barriers*
  - b. *To establish and build mutual understanding of the problems and needs of the opposing sides of the on-going conflict in Mindanao*
  - c. *To develop common sentiments about the hardship and sufferings inflicted upon combatants' families by war, and generate among them strong friendship and a powerful longing for peace.*
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## B. Social Preparation

Social preparation activities were conducted aimed at identifying the project participants and conducting initial activities for building trust and healing the trauma of war, separately, in each of the three groups of women: indigenous women, wives and mothers of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and wives and daughters of the Philippine AFP soldiers.



**Lumad, Muslim, and Christian Women who have experienced pain and conflict wash each others hands as a sign of forgiveness and friendship**



**A Military wife participant imprints her palm as a symbol of her commitment to a life of continuous dialogue with people of other faiths, and cultures**

*Meeting & presentation of the project to the barangay council chairperson and members.*

The identification of prospective participants was done through the assistance of the local government at the barangay. The teams first approached the barangay officials and presented the program to them. The program was discussed with the barangay chairperson and council members.



After the presentation, we asked on the actual locations of the target participants. Names were given by the officials and schedules for house visits were set.

The identification and invitation of MNLF housewives was arranged by the team headed by Ateneo Peace Institute through Muslim groups assisting the community. It was presented to the team that the community of MNLF housewives from Tictapol are interested to participate. The team scheduled for a community visit to conduct the trauma healing sessions at the barangay.



The second phase of the social preparation consisted of the Healing and Culture of Peace workshops conducted in three batches separately for Lumad (20 all-women participants), Muslims (20 all-women participants) and Christian women (17 participants).



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## Component 2: Establishing a Center for Interfaith Dialogue & Peace Education

- ***Built a data base of existing educational materials on interfaith dialogue and peace education***
- ***Conducted a regional consultation among interfaith leaders, Government agencies, civil society organizations, children and youth on the future prospects of interfaith and peace education for children***
- ***Developed a trainers' training manual on interfaith and peace education for children***
- ***Launched a Center for Interfaith Dialogue and Peace education***



Interview with Key Informant and FGD of IFL on interfaith education and peace



The module writers



## **Impact of the project:**

### **For component 1:**

1. **Psycho-emotional healing of the participants.** This is the major impact of the project. The project spent 3 months with the participants doing on-site trauma healing session. Providing the participants a venue for sharing their hurts and being listened to proved effective.
2. **Sense of community and feeling of belongingness developed.** The women who participated in this project had experienced war and conflict. Stories such as houses burned, husband or child killed by the encounter, maimed due to the war were shared. Bitterness, fear and suspicion had been their way a life. The project provided them an opportunity to interact to other women in the community sharing common experience developing in them an opportunity to be listened to.
3. **A culture of peace promoted, understood & practiced in the community.** Having undergone workshops on the culture of peace and trauma healing sessions the women developed an attitude and way of life of resolving conflict nonviolently.
4. **Constructive approaches to conflict resolution learned.**

### **For component 2:**

1. **Wider awareness on peace education and interfaith dialogue.** The focus group discussions conducted all over the island of Mindanao among various stakeholders made them realize the importance of peace education and interfaith dialogue in the attainment of sustainable peace in Mindanao.
2. **Commitment of Interfaith Leaders, Government and Non-government organizations, Academe and other institutions to interfaith dialogue and peace education.** Having participated in the focus group discussions different stakeholders realized the importance of peace education and interfaith dialogue and committed to integrate this in their regular programs.

For both components, the project gave Ateneo de Zamboanga an opportunity to make a dent in the search for peace in Mindanao, for the community extension and research offices of the university to work as a team and for each member who participated in the project to again find meaning in the work they are doing.

### **c) What difficulties were encountered and how were solutions found?**

The establishment of a Program for the Promotion of Peace through Interfaith Dialogue and Education provided lessons which may guide future implementation of similar projects. The following were the lessons learned:

1. Bringing together women who have been scarred by war was a memorable and satisfactory experience but it required patience, perseverance and the dedication of all the members of the team.
2. Mobilization and strong logistical support were highly important for the success of this kind of endeavor.
3. Empowerment at all levels and teamwork among the more than 25 staff member of the implementing teams was essential.
4. Developing training modules adopting them the context of the intended participants was needed to achieve the goal of the project as shown in component I.
5. Working on a very tight budget may sometimes become an obstacle to the effective conduct of certain activities.
6. Coordinating several organizations with different concerns and activities was most challenging. But because of the dedication and maturity exhibited by the members of the team and the Ignatian spirit working within each person the task on hand was successfully completed.
7. The participatory processes used in component II proved to be very useful. The consultation conducted among stakeholders in 4 cities of Mindanao achieved its goals of identifying the content of the modules developed in component II and determining the prospects of interfaith dialogue and peace education in addressing local conflicts. In addition, the process also served as a venue for advocacy and generation of support for the project.

**d) As a result of the project what was UNESCO's visibility in the Member State?**

The program had two components. For activities for component 1 was made exclusive for women loved ones of combatants and Subanen women who were victims of armed conflicts.

Component 2 which was the launching of the Center for interfaith peace education program was participated by government and civil society groups of Zamboanga City. Especially invited were those who participated in the development of the trainer's training module.

The proceedings of component 1 was made public during the launching of the center through a video presentation. Brochures illustrating the two components were also distributed to the participants. Publication of the results of the both components 1 and 2 will be made in various forms. In this way the commitment of UNESCO to the development of peace will be made known.