



Grassroots communities weaving a path for Just Peace amidst challenges

By Amabella Carumba

Six (6) *T'duray* women – one of the more than twenty groups of Indigenous Peoples in Mindanao – wearing their colourful traditional dress, shook my hand vigorously and a couple embraced me tightly as they arrived at the Upi Agricultural School, the venue of the 6th Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit. Tired from the long habal-habal (motorcycle vehicles) travel and some trekking from the interior communities of South Upi, these women were still all smiles as they proudly showed off their *agong* (an indigenous musical instrument) to me. They were part of the 125 women delegates out of the 393 participants to the sixth Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit, which took place December from December 12 till 16, 2010, in Upi, Maguindanao Province, Mindanao, the Philippines. The women were the *agong* players that accompany the *Bal'ian* (spiritual leader) in the opening and closing rituals.

The Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (MPPM) is an alliance of peoples' organizations and peace and human rights groups in Mindanao, advancing the participation and engagement of the grassroots tri-people groups (the three major tribal groups in Mindanao are the Lumads/ Indigenous groups, the Migrante/ Christians and the Bangsamoro/ Muslims) in building peace in conflict-torn Mindanao.

Now on its 10th year, the Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (MPPM) had been launching biennial summits that serve as a General Assembly of this grassroots tri-people movement as each one renews and affirms their commitment to peacebuilding. The peace summit also serves as a space to celebrate the various peace initiatives in the communities, and provides a venue for relevant discussions on issues affecting the lives of the grassroots tri-people.

Focusing on Indigenous Peoples

The 2010 summit focused on the concerns and situation of the Indigenous Peoples (IP's) in relation to the Mindanao peace processes, including their right to self-determination. The summit intended to give an open space for IP's to share, as well as to the Bangsamoro people and the Mindanao migrants to gain understanding on the situation of the IP's in Mindanao.

Keynote speaker was the Chairperson of the Committee on Cultural Communities of the House of Representatives, Representative Teodoro Baguilat, Jr. Various important issues were discussed, including conflicting laws concerning the IP's, the role of mining companies concerning the right to self-determination, harassment of and the use of violence against IP's as well as the vulnerable position IP's are in being attacked by both military and rebel groups. The passionate exchange of ideas, thoughts and feelings continued when Satur Ocampo, former Chairman of the Peace Panel of the National Democratic Front provided updates on the peace process in the Philippines, linking this to the situation of IPs. Many IPs had been recruited by the Communist Party of the Philippines/New Peoples Army/ National Democratic Front (CPP/NPA/NDF) during the Martial Law Period. Many of these recruits left the movement and returned to their communities, yet they are still perceived as communist rebels by the military.

It became clear that the summit did not provide enough time to address all the issues IPs are confronted with. It was suggested to continue the open discourse between the rebel groups and the government, possibly in a forum solely called for this purpose.

A Peoples' Summit of Issues and Actions – Thematic Workshops

As every summit for the past three years, thematic workshops were organized, to allow more in-depth and focused discussion to take place. This year, the thematic workshops included: Migration and Development; Women, Peace & Security; Engaging men in Gender Justice and Peacebuilding; Climate Justice; Foreign Military Presence and it's Implication to the Peace and Security of Mindanao; Food Sovereignty and Land Grabbing; and Youth and Peacebuilding. All the workshops were highly appreciated by the participants.

Engaging men in Gender Justice and Peacebuilding

In a society where patriarchy and feudalism are still very much evident, some local cultures still mainly expect women to remain within the household. This mindset is an important reason why the inclusion of women on all

decision-making levels of peacebuilding remains a struggle and challenge. MPPM strives to strike a balance between genders and to give equal opportunities to women when selecting its officers and leadership. However, some of the communities that are part of MPPM mainly designate leadership roles to men. In the roster of Bangsamoro and Katawhang Lumad council, only one quarter of the leadership positions are taken up by women. Some communities have active women leaders, while in others, women are hardly present on higher levels. Examples can be found where men do not support women to represent their tribes in spite of women's active involvement in many peacebuilding initiatives.

This attitude of male dominance and patronizing women also came out in the thematic workshop of "Engaging Men in Gender Justice and Peacebuilding", facilitated by Mr. Valtimore Fenis, a council member of MPPM, and participant of the WPP 2009-2010 pilot Training of Trainers on gender-sensitive peacebuilding for male peace activists. During the workshop many male delegates expressed the stereotypical view of women as merely homemakers. Some were even quick to point out that it's not easy to challenge traditional practices which have become the norms in certain communities. During the workshop, they reflected that changing attitudes, behaviors and mindsets take a long time but with efforts already underway, these could bear fruit in the future.

Mr. Fenis and the women activists from the Mindanao Tri-People Women Resource Center, who facilitated the excellent workshop on Women, Peace and Security, reflected afterwards on the challenges grassroots tri-people women are faced with. Though sometimes the challenges can be overwhelming, the women are characterized by spirit and strength.

It was evident after the summit that women will no longer tolerate playing second fiddle to their male counterparts. During the 1st Council Meeting after the Summit, the women of the Maguindanao tribe (one of the 13 Islamized ethno-linguistic tribes of the Bangsamoro) wrote a strongly worded position paper challenging the new leadership of MPPM to address these issues of male chauvinism within the considered progressive ranks of the peace movement. To them, it is not a matter of competition but rather to be treated with dignity and respect as human beings and be given the equal and just opportunity to become leaders.

"Generation Gap"

The issue of youth and its position within MPPM came up during the summit as well. Youth, in Mindanao and worldwide, are vocal in articulating their issues, and challenges. With a dynamic and vibrant attitude, they challenge traditional and older notions and practices, which were deemed as right or at least as accepted for a long time. The youth questions these practices, and older generations often respond in a defensive manner. The youth demand for change if they feel there is something wrong with the status quo. For example, the current people's uprising in the Arab world is being led by young people.

Staying together

In retrospect, the Mindanao People's Peace Movement is a microcosm of the wider Mindanao society. Its membership is as diverse as the tri-people grassroots communities of Mindanao. The issues, interests and positions of individuals, clans and groups on certain matters are products of the colonial past, inherited stereotypes, biases and animosities. Yet, it is also a story of people with diverse and different sets of beliefs, cultures and ways of life that consciously struggle to work and stay together amidst these diversities to effect positive changes in their lives.

The 6th Mindanao People's Peace Summit was another manifestation of these dynamics, of this journeying together, and of weaving together a path towards just peace in communities in Mindanao.

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