

PEACE BEYOND SIGNED AGREEMENTS

A Review of Long-Term Conflict
Mediation & Multi-stakeholder
Security Coordination in Sulu,
Philippines, 2010-2022



Centre for
Humanitarian
Dialogue

Mediation for peace

Acknowledgments

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Lastly, HD Centre wishes to express its gratitude and admiration for Tumikang Sama-Sama and its members, for their untiring work towards the peaceful resolution of violent conflict in their home province of Sulu. We hope that this publication is able to capture a portion of their valuable contribution to peace in the BARMM.

Disclaimer

This publication is based on the independent evaluation commissioned by the HD Centre. The views in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the HD Centre nor any of its donors.

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Foreword

Barangay Silangkan in the province of Sulu, Philippines bears the deep scars of prolonged conflict. Memories of aerial bombardment, mortar and artillery fire remain fresh in the minds of the community. Insurgency had provided cover for the activities of Abu Sayyaf. Silangkan had also seen much clan conflict-related violence, which made it hard for local businesses to operate, for children to go to school, and for basic needs to be met.

In 2010, matters came to a head when a former senior Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) commander, Abtajir Tingkasan, was drawn into an election-related clan conflict. Abtajir, however, agreed to give peace a chance and supported a Tumikang Sama Sama (TSS)-led mediation and settlement of his clan conflict, which eventually led his community to declare Silangkan a “Peace Centered Community”. Abtajir too transformed into an influential local mediator. Silangkan’s new story of peace is a testament to the work of TSS.

“Tumikang Sama Sama” – which means “Together we move forward” in Sinug, the language spoken by Tausugs - was established when local CSOs and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) recognised that clan feuds (*rido*) in the region could easily expand to proxy conflict if left unresolved. *Rido* results in violence, displacements of civilians, and other dire socio-economic consequences. Such horizontal violence is also a serious threat to the overall peace process in Mindanao. TSS, led by locals, thus works to address the security concerns of Sulu by providing opportunities for peaceful and neutral conflict resolution within conflict-prone communities.

Since then, TSS has handled over 200 clan conflicts and resolved around 150 in the last ten years. Clan conflict mediation by TSS has also led to an informal yet effective coordination mechanism with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police, and MNLF. Sulu is now seeing improved levels of peace in its communities. In addition, TSS has piloted development projects on education and entrepreneurship so that the community can better experience the dividends from peace.

In the last decade, HD and TSS' best practices and lessons learned were also able to guide other local mediators in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). This includes the Maguindanao-based Bangsamoro Mediators Inc., composed jointly of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and MNLF members. Most recently, HD and TSS supported 30 volunteer mediators working on 12 clan conflicts in the six acknowledged MILF camps. Overall, TSS has demonstrated how local-level mediation is an effective way to reduce violence and strengthen the broader peace process in the Philippines. The TSS experience also shows how the justice system can make use of mediated agreements to resolve disputes.

We hope that this publication, which is an external evaluation of TSS' work in the Philippines from 2010-2022, will catalyse more discussions – especially among fellow practitioners, the donor community, and local, regional, and national-level policymakers – on how we can build and sustain a community of practice that combines the unique, traditional perspectives of mediation in the Bangsamoro with global experience. We also hope that by sharing our valuable lessons from local clan conflict mediation, we can encourage other local mediators and inspire the international community to provide support through expertise and funding for these initiatives that bring peace to those affected by violent conflict.

This external evaluation builds on the 2012 external evaluation of TSS, titled “Taking Peace Into Their Own Hands”. That publication looked at TSS and HD's early contributions through the Government of the Philippines (GPH)-MNLF Peace Working Group. It also explored TSS' first few mediated cases of *rido*, efforts to prevent election violence, and the establishment of relationships with the local security sector.

HD would like to thank Maria Carmen (Ica) Fernandez for her tireless effort in documenting our work with TSS in Sulu, and for helping us share this story beyond Mindanao and the Philippines. This publication is also a demonstration of our sincerest appreciation for our partners and stakeholders in Sulu over the years. We hope to continue to walk alongside all of you towards peace and prosperity in the years to come.

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue – Philippines

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Acronyms

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AHJAG	Ad Hoc Joint Action Group
ARMM	Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BIAF	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
BTA	Bangsamoro Transition Authority
BTC	Bangsamoro Transition Commission
CAB	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
CRT	Community Relations Training
DOJ	Department of Justice
HD Centre	Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
IDP	Internally displaced persons
JCCCH	Joint Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities
JMSCC	Joint Task Force Sulu – Moro National Liberation Front – Sulu Provincial Police Office Coordinating Committee
JTF	Joint Task Force
MAFAR	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Agrarian Reform

MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MENRE	Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and Energy
MHSD	Ministry of Human Settlements and Development
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MILG	Ministry of Interior and Local Government
MIPA	Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MPOS	Ministry of Public Order and Safety
MTIT	Ministry of Trade, Investments and Tourism
OPAPRU	Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity
PCC	Peace-centered communities
PCIA	Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment
PNP	Philippine National Police
PPOC	Provincial Peace and Order Council
PSRO	Peace, Security, and Reconciliation Office
RRUC	Regional Reconciliation and Unification Commission
SACC	Sulu Area Coordinating Center
SUCPD	Sulu Ulama Council for Peace and Development
TSS	Tumikang Sama-Sama, Inc.
UXO	Unexploded ordnances

Peace beyond signed agreements: A review of long-term conflict mediation & multi-stakeholder security coordination in Sulu, Philippines, 2010-2022

Executive summary¹

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) has supported peace and stability efforts in the province of Sulu since its beginnings in the Philippines in the mid-2000s, notably through HD Centre's partnership with local mediation group Tumikang Sama-Sama (TSS). TSS—which translates in Sinug to “together we move forward”—began as a group of Tausug civil society leaders, eminent persons, and HD Centre consultants supporting peace dialogues with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and other groups engaged in conflict in Sulu. It reorganised as an independent mechanism in 2009, and formally registered as a non-profit organization in 2014.

¹ Findings drawn from the broader report, “A Review of Conflict Mediation & Multi-stakeholder Security Coordination in Sulu, Philippines, 2010-2022” by Maria Carmen “Ica” Fernandez. Based on data analysis and field interviews conducted in Sulu, Cotabato, and Manila from September 2022 to March 2023, the review focuses on two interlocking streams: (i) hybrid dialogue tools and shuttle mediation for mediating clan conflicts, referred to as rido or pagbanta; and (ii) the use of these dialogue processes for security coordination between local stakeholders, notably, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), Philippine National Police (PNP), members of the MNLF, and other hard-to-reach groups. Although not included in the original design of the review, a third stream covers post-settlement education and livelihood support pilots for select partner communities previously subject to mediation.

This note summarises findings from a review of long-term conflict mediation and multi-stakeholder security coordination efforts undertaken by HD Centre with TSS from 2010 to 2022. In Sinug, conflict mediation is referred to as *pagpati'ut* or *pagsulut*, featuring a complex *adat* (unwritten customary law) and shari'ah-based system that HD Centre and TSS integrate with structured tools such as conflict analysis and signed peace covenants that are administratively and legally admissible. While HD Centre and TSS are not the only peace-focused organizations operating on the island, few have focused on Sulu with the same depth, breadth, and consistency. The neutralization of more than 200 local wars is seen as having a sizeable contribution to an island-society of just 1 million people, ensuring the link between grassroots concerns and the broader conversations at the peace tables with the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

In an environment where insurgents have been negotiating for almost as long as they have been fighting against security forces, and implementation of agreements has been non-linear, the evidence from Sulu points to the value of an expanded framework for building peace beyond signed agreements. This covers dialogue, mediation and settlement, multi-stakeholder security coordination, and post-settlement socio-economic and justice-related interventions—a suite of processes that local stakeholders found highly relevant in a transitional landscape such as the Bangsamoro.

Key elements of the TSS-HD process include: bridging customary/traditional practices with formal justice and public order and safety mechanisms; ensuring deep community buy-in and local ownership even with hard-to-reach armed actors; and combining local leadership with global expertise, alongside funding independent from local interests. Engagement was sought even during major non-*rido* events, building long-term trust beyond “just a ‘project’”. However, there are relative advantages and disadvantages of keeping things informal and relational, as this is susceptible to changes in personnel.

To ensure sustainability, mediation and coordination should support parallel tracks that address root causes and triggers, alongside legal and socio-economic follow-through, including amnesties and pardons. Moving forward,

this also requires a reimagining of how conflict and mediation impact data is collected and monitored, shifting away from donor- focused indicators and towards local needs and processes.

Key points:

- Mediating and resolving conflict at the grassroots level can positively impact communities undergoing post-agreement war-to-peace transitions especially where kinship ties – as well as local traditional politics – remain strong.
- The effects of successful locally-owned mediation support can be measured through sustained material changes felt by community stakeholders.
- Trust built through mediation can open doors to better security coordination and development interventions such as livelihood and education. However, such support must be consistent and linked to broader, institutionalised processes.
- There is a growing need for more locally-driven monitoring, evaluation and learning practices and methods that effectively capture progress, preferably over longer time periods, while building capacities of future generations of grassroots mediators.

Context and relevance

- 1 | The Bangsamoro peace processes are at a crucial phase.** From 2010 to 2022, Muslim Mindanao saw a shift from peace negotiations to peace agreement implementation; from the old governance structures of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to the Parliament of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), led on an interim basis by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); to a security environment where the Philippine government must contend not only with the MILF or its precursor the MNLF, but also a fragmented array of black-flag, Islamic State-inspired actors.
- 2 | Increasing pressure to fulfill the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) prior to the first BARMM elections in May 2025 complicates these dynamics.** The appointive Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) is a fledgling parliament still undergoing institutional transition. Implementation of the CAB's normalization commitments—namely the decommissioning of MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) along with socio-economic, legal, and justice-related interventions that will allow former combatants and their families to live unarmed civilian lives—remains incomplete. The leadership of the two factions of the MNLF are now onboard with several BTA ministers of parliament appointed from both the Misuari and the Sema-Jikiri group. However, there remain gaps between the 2014 agreement with the MILF and the 1996 deal with the MNLF, despite current efforts through two national-level Coordinating Committees between the Philippine Government and the two factions of the MNLF, and an announced MNLF Transformation Program.
- 3 | Peace and stability in Sulu is perceived to have improved in recent years, amidst spikes in communal violence in other provinces in the BARMM.** Enabling factors identified include increased security investments in Sulu after the 2017 Marawi

Siege alongside reintegration packages for Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) surrenderees; the use of Duterte-era Martial Law restrictions to keep local chief executives in line; COVID-19 quarantines incentivizing local elites to invest in local tourism; not to mention the uncontested consolidation of political power under one family. Sulu remains heavily militarised despite withdrawal of the Marines in 2021, leaving the AFP and PNP to contend with the continued presence of MNLF camps and remaining pockets of ASG. Dialogue mechanisms between the AFP, local PNP, and MNLF with third-party facilitation through TSS and the *ulama* exist to manage the flow of information and diffuse tensions, but this is largely informal. In contrast to other areas, the MILF-BIAF has a limited footprint in Sulu, thus there are no formal field-level equivalents to the GPH-MILF Joint Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (JCCCH) or the Ad-Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG).

- 4** | **The tail-end of a peace process comes with both risks and opportunity; unmet high expectations make the risk of fragmentation highly likely.** Incentives for inter-elite and inter-communal violence in the form of *rido* and *pagbanta* may continue unabated. With the strategic role of Sulu in Philippine-Malaysia-Indonesia tri-border security as well as its location adjacent to major global shipping lanes, ensuring stability in the island is a regional priority. It is in this context that the work of HD Centre and TSS is likely to remain relevant. Thus, the short three-year extension to the mandate of the BTA until 2025 provides a window of opportunity for HD Centre and TSS to lock in gains from the last decade of implementation, manage grievances, ensure stability despite potential turbulence pre- and post- May 2025.

Results and contributions

- 5** | **The review identified how the three processes of clan conflict mediation, security coordination, and livelihood and education-related post-settlement interventions implemented by TSS and HD Centre significantly contributed to peace and stability in**

Sulu. From 2010 to 2023, TSS with HD Centre support facilitated 238 clan conflict mediation processes, covering 18 out of the 19 municipalities of Sulu, as well as three cases in two municipalities of Basilan, and one case in Zamboanga. Existing records state that at least 66.39% (158 cases) were formally settled, while 1.68% (4 cases) remain dormant but retain the possibility of recurrence. As of yearend 2023, 9 cases were ongoing active mediation. One indicator of success is how prior to 2017, TSS had to seek out and surface conflict through ‘Speak Out’ sessions; in the last five years, all handled cases have been directly endorsed to TSS by local governments, religious leaders, or the security sector for evaluation.

“Dormant” cases include that of clans who refuse to sign formal peace compacts if the situations are deemed too delicate to incite formal dialogue processes, notably when the conflict is protracted or if multiple deaths have occurred. Instead, the parties agree to a cessation of hostilities without needing to dredge up past hurts. Only two cases with a signed peace compact have recurred: both instances involves clan members who had moved to Sabah prior to the mediation process, and once returning to Sulu, had refused to acknowledge an agreement they were not directly involved in.

6 | Grassroots-level clan conflict mediation translates to broader community effects due to expanded kinship and proxy wars.

Similar to other areas in the BARMM, the triggers of *pagbanta* in Sulu can range from petty disagreements over kites and basketball games, to issues over land, politics, and general access to resources. However, the close-knit ties of Tausug society often means that that if allowed to escalate, small-scale clan violence can expand and transform into proxy wars, with each side aligned to local elites and/or members of various armed groups. Part of this is blood kinship and political ties, but also the high cost of prolonged warfare: in order to buy bullets and food, rights to land and other productive resources are often mortgaged to elite backers willing to finance conflict.

- 7** | **The bridging of customary and traditional mediation practices with the formal justice and public order system is a major contribution to peace.** In an area where customary practice often trumps formal institutions in terms of community legitimacy, the work of TSS and HD Centre codifies indigenous knowledge on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in a way that is now considered legally and administratively admissible by the barangay justice system, local courts, and the PNP. Resulting knowledge products include a Sinug-language *pagpatit'ut* guidebook as well as a 2018 regional Conflict Mediation Guidebook published by the now-defunct ARMM Regional Reconciliation and Unification Commission (RRUC). While the ARMM-to-BARMM transition means that the RRUC and its personnel have now been replaced by the BARMM Ministry of Public Order and Safety (MPOS), requests have been made to continue this work for scaling-up at the regional level, with early-stage knowledge sharing and mentorship being extended by TSS and HD Centre with counterparts in mainland BARMM. This has implications for the development of the ADR components of the Bangsamoro Justice System, and normalization in general, including the CAB's unimplemented commitments regarding community policing. A working regional database of *rido* and *pagbanta* previously held by the ARMM-RRUC and now the BARMM MPOS anchors such efforts, which HD Centre has continued to assist with, including mapping emerging tensions in the six camps acknowledged by the GPH-MILF peace process. While the BARMM has also created a Peace, Security, and Reconciliation Office (PSRO) that absorbs some of the mandates of the joint ceasefire mechanisms by engaging the MILF-BIAF, its precise interface with the MPOS remains unclear.
- 8** | **Local respondents stated that if TSS and HD Centre were not operating in the area, barangay (village) and municipal officials or traditional leaders would normally handle mediation.** However, they highlighted that TSS-HD Centre has the distinct advantages of independence, combined local and global expertise, and

access to third-party funding not beholden to local political interests. Similarly, the TSS-HD Centre positioning as a long-term and discreet private diplomacy initiative led by Tausug mediators means that these activities are not just a “project” limited by donor cycles. This translates to high trust and local ownership. It must also be noted that the TSS-HD Centre partnership is an unusual example of a healthy dynamic between an INGO and a local organization, with its gradual shift to independence and TSS being named co-applicant of the final EU grant with HD Centre in 2019.

Contributions: Kawman-level mediation

- 9** | **Stakeholders in Sulu defined a successful mediation in terms of material and measurable changes in the lives of the affected community.** The review sought to document *kawman* (community)-level results in three municipalities: Kalingalan Caluang, Indanan, and Jolo. To substantiate contributions, data was organised against the seven Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) thematic areas identified in the original 2012 TSS evaluation commissioned by HD Centre and the European Union, namely: (i) conflict management; (ii) armed violence and sense of security; (iii) political structures and processes; (iv) economic structures and processes (which translates strongly in community terms as access to livelihood); (v) social empowerment (including a education); (vi) gender responsiveness; and (vii) environment (which in community terms translates mostly to food security). Three additional indicators were added during the review: (viii) peace financing²; and (ix) mobility and displacement; and (x) other post-settlement interventions such as basic support

²The review uses this term to loosely refer to the purposive programming of public funds to sustain peace. In the Sulu context, this can range from the national, regional, or provincial financing of reintegration programs; to local barangay captains and mayors paying for mediation processes. Expenses associated with mediation include the repair of damaged property, hospitalization of wounded parties, ‘honoraria’ for leaders involved in the mediation process, and most commonly, raising ‘blood money’, referred to in the vernacular as *diyyat* or *bangun*. The price of blood money per crime (or other penalties, as in the case of elopement) is codified based on customary practice, but precise amounts vary across municipalities.

infrastructure and access to justice, particularly for those with outstanding warrants.

10 | **Table 1 below summarises basic qualitative results for the sample sites.** While the rural indicators hew closely to commonly understood features of *rido* and *pagbanta*, the Jolo cases tend to be more symbolic or politically-charged in nature. Notable cases handled by TSS include the settlement of issues after the 2021 shooting of the provincial director of the Sulu police force by a subordinate. As a measure of trust and confidence, TSS has also been asked to facilitate other non-*pagbanta* related but equally weighty dialogues such as those related to the clearing of informal settler families on the runway of Jolo airport; public consultations on the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law in partnership with the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC); community processing of the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombings and the 2023 sinking of the M/V Lady Mary Joy passenger ferry; as well as discussions between the BARMM Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism (MTIT) and Jolo's business community on the economic impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns. While signed and notarised peace covenants are acknowledged by the police and the Jolo fiscal's office as legally admissible, only one case handled by TSS has involved the local courts³, largely due to Sulu residents' general distaste for 'paper' proceedings.

³ In 2022, part of the penalties requested by the aggrieved party on top of the payment of blood money was that a case be filed formally at the local Sulu court to put the issue (an attempted shooting between two women) on public record before withdrawing the case, without any legal charges to be sought. The signed peace covenant was used by the judge as documentary proof of amicable settlement to justify the withdrawal.

Table 1. Common post-mediation results across rural and urban sites

PCIA Impact Area	Common Indicators	
	Rural	Urban
Conflict Management	Number of <i>pagbanta</i> settled without recurrence. Most are contained within one municipality but there are some spillovers in hotspot communities.	Number of <i>pagbanta</i> settled without recurrence Spillovers from rural areas; events in urban areas tend to be more symbolic or politically-charged
Armed Violence and Sense of Security	Reduction in public carrying of firearms, only “legitimate” actors bear arms (although this may include MNLF)	Sense of safety and security improved, usually in terms of ease of movement and ability to feel safe in public areas
Political Structures and Processes	Barangay officials, mayor, and security sector are involved in conflict mediation; this is perceived as the minimum indicator of a functional LGU	Acknowledgment of <i>pagpati’ut</i> and peace covenants as proof of amicable settlement in legal and administrative proceedings
*Peace financing	LGU officials contribute to <i>diyyat/bangun</i> and other mediation expenses	Not all local leaders agree with the provision of blood money. Other equivalents in play → Increase in number of former combatants joining reintegration programs; increase in funding provided to sustain these programs
Economic Structures and Processes; *Access to Livelihood	Resumption of livelihood and jobs after mediation (farming, food and trade related). Estimated growth of economic activity post-mediation but this is mostly citizen-led	Increase in active businesses

PCIA Impact Area	Common Indicators	
	Rural	Urban
Social Empowerment *and Access to Education	<p>Parties attend each other's social functions</p> <p>Increase in enrollment, children return to school</p> <p>Youth activities</p>	Reduction in out-of-school youth, especially young men
Gender responsiveness	<p>Role of women facilitators</p> <p>Role of women as conflict actors</p>	Same
Environmental Protection *and Food Security	<p>Resumption of farming</p> <p>Water sources unblocked</p> <p>Food supply lines resume</p> <p>Community-led UXO clearance (1 case)</p>	Food security in Jolo emerged as an issue during the Zamboanga Siege and Lahad Datu standoff
*Mobility and displacement	<p>Freer movement made possible by mediation</p> <p>However, most parties to conflict are now working in Sabah or Palawan</p>	<p>Less checkpoints, reducing travel time to and from Jolo</p> <p>Reduced number of IDPs hosted (Balik Barangay)</p>
*Post-mediation gaps	Presence of livelihood projects, development interventions, amnesty proceedings	Amnesties and pardons; issues around live warrants

* Areas not identified in the 2012 evaluation

Contributions: Security coordination

- 11** | **Multi-stakeholder security coordination with local leaders, the AFP, PNP, and MNLF is a natural component and consequence of clan conflict mediation in Sulu, as the same lines of engagement and techniques used in *pagpati'ut* come into play and are strengthened by layers of trust built over time.** In the beginning, this was related to the role of the AFP in enforcing ceasefires and buffer zones during live clan conflicts, but deepened from 2010 onwards when TSS and HD Centre began working with the AFP by co-designing and facilitating a Community Relations Training (CRT) module for the Philippine Marines. The CRT was aligned with the 2010-2016 AFP Internal Peace and Security Plan Bayanihan, which focused on a whole-of-government approach to security, and highlighted the primacy of a civilian-led peace process underpinned by security sector reform over traditional counterinsurgency and counterterrorism modalities. Bayanihan also articulated a goal of gradual post-agreement demilitarization in order to shift resources to external territorial security. For many newly-deployed soldiers, the CRT was the first time they had spoken face-to-face with the *ulama* and members of the MNLF, and opened up possibilities for peaceful and strategic cooperation and information sharing to avoid misunderstandings and manage conflicts in a proactive manner.⁴
- 12** | **This coordinative ethos underpinned subsequent bilateral initiatives such as the informal link between the AFP and MNLF.** Common use cases relate to troop movements or ensuring MNLF cooperation during AFP operations against ASG or regular PNP law enforcement operations, investigating brewing *pagbanta* involving armed actors, or managing kidnap-for-ransom cases, with at least one case related to the kidnapping of police personnel. This depth of experience and growing trust led to a shift from reactive crisis management and civilian protection during live conflict to more

⁴ The CRT also formed part of the then-field commander's Bridging Leadership Program project, run by the Asian Institute of Management with funding from the World Bank and the Australian Government.

actions related to prevention. This eventually evolved by 2018 as an informal mechanism between the security forces namely the AFP's JTF Sulu, PNP, and the MNLF (collectively known as the PNP-MNLF-AFP Coordinating Committee or 'PMACC'), with the ulama and mediators such as TSS assisting with communications for particularly sensitive cases upon request.

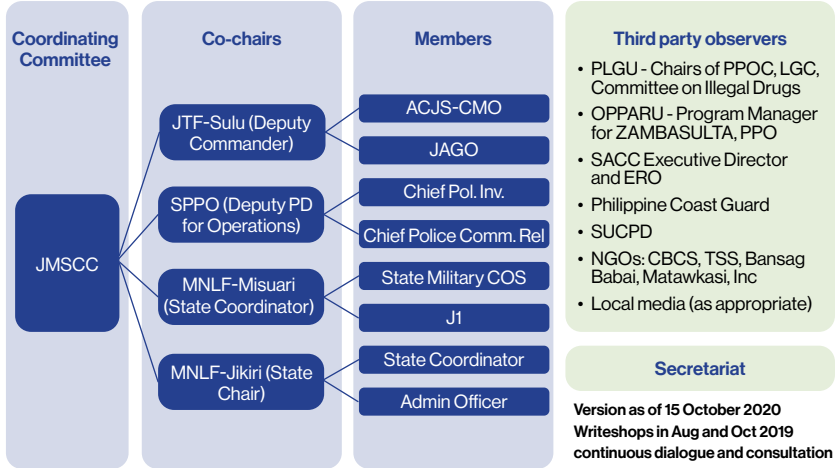
- 13** | **At the same time, other homegrown mechanisms were active, such as the dialogues facilitated by the Sulu Ulama Council for Peace and Development (SUCPD) to reach out to critical commanders of the MNLF such as Uztadz Habier Malik and Uztadz Tahir Sali, and even ASG figures such as Radullan Sahiron and Isnilon Hapilon.** The Provincial Government of Sulu also ran its Sulu Area Coordinating Center (SACC) to manage dealings with CSOs and grassroots organizations, with a separate line of engagement with MNLF. This marked a gradual opening of formal spaces for local NGOs and CSOs to engage in security issues. Apart from its role in Bantay Bayanihan from 2011 to 2016, by 2017 TSS was appointed as an official member of the Sulu Provincial Peace and Order Council (PPOC) and eventually was invited to join the civilian advisory boards of the AFP and the PNP. From 2019 onwards, TSS also spearheaded the ONE Sulu consortium of local NGOs engaging in elections monitoring with funding from the Australian Government.
- 14** | **The weakness of these ad-hoc security coordination mechanisms is that they were (and remain to be) highly relational and therefore susceptible to changes in personnel as well as national priorities and frameworks.** Several cases involve managing issues arising from new AFP or PNP field commanders intending to “make a mark” by conducting security operations without coordinating with the MNLF; as such, much effort is expended in briefing new personnel given constant rotations. In response to this issue, previous AFP leaders suggested the

creation of what has been referred to since 2019 as a proposed Joint Task Force Sulu – MNLF – Sulu Provincial Police Office (SPPO) Coordinating Committee or JMSSC, with the mandate of “facilitating dialogue in cases of conflict involving/affecting the MNLF, AFP, PNP, in order to foster and maintain the harmonious relationship amongst members and communities”⁵. A draft protocol and IRR was drafted through extensive workshops and dialogues since October 2019 but has yet to be signed.

15 **Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed composition and structure of the JMSSC, highlighting co-chairmanship from AFP, PNP, and the two MNLF factions.** As a security coordination structure, civilian actors are identified as third-party observers. These are: the provincial government's key committees and its SACC, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU), the Philippine Coast Guard, SUCPD, as well as four respected local NGOs. An option is included to invite local media as appropriate. Figure 2 identifies five substantive elements of the proposed guidelines, from statement of principles, to identification of processes for coordination, verification, problem solving, and assistance in law enforcement; reiteration of legal restrictions; and arrangements to ensure sustainability. All these elements merely put in writing what has evolved as ‘best practice’ from the perspective of local actors. The only ‘new’ aspect of the JMSSC is a clear intent to ensure sustainability regardless of staff turnover by encoding multi-stakeholder coordination into military and police doctrine, as well as identifying a secretariat function. The current JMSSC draft names TSS and HD Centre as secretariat, but states that they may be replaced by the co-chairs should performance be unsatisfactory or if funding is no longer available.

⁵ JMSSC Formal Local Coordination Guidelines. Draft as of 15 October 2020, revised at the Garden Orchid Hotel, Zamboanga City on 6 October 2019, following the earlier revision at Kutah General Teodulfo Bautista, Bus-Bus, Jolo, Sulu on 30 August 2019.

Figure 1. Proposed JMSSC structure



16 | As the JMSSC guidelines were drafted based on the consensus of Sulu-level actors, national and regional sign-off is required to formalise what is already being done on the ground, albeit informally. Although shrinking fiscal space post-COVID understandably makes state actors hesitant to establish new formal security architectures, the evidence thus far points to how such basic coordinative protocols can be done within existing budgets, and that any additional costs (say, of setting up hotlines, running meetings, or issuing formal IDs) are negligible compared to the financial and human costs when misunderstandings are not resolved and commanders rotate.

Figure 2. Elements of the proposed JMSSC agreement

Principles	Processes	Activities	Reiteration of restrictions	Ensuring sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration with LGUs, community elders, religious leaders • Coordination of movement • Ensuring good relationship amongst members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updated MNLF rosters • MNLF ID cards • Official hotline numbers • Quarterly meetings • Submission of names of MNLF with standing warrants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance of MNLF in law enforcement operations • Discussion of issues affecting MNLF without prejudice to application of law, due process • Intra-MNLF programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No FAs or uniforms outside camps • No new camps • No ransom policy • Prevention of violent excessiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mechanism to remain in place in event of change of leadership; AFP and PNP to endorse to incoming commanders • Secretariat Function

Contributions: Post-mediation interventions

17 | **At this stage of the Bangsamoro peace processes, a major challenge is addressing unmet expectations of the “peace dividend”.** This is rooted in the history of multiple waves of socio-economic programs after the 1996 Final Peace Agreement which many felt were undermined by inefficiencies and elite capture, and thus did not always trickle down to grassroots actors. Parallels can also be drawn for clan-level mediation, begging the question: do conflict actors’ material conditions change after a formal settlement is reached? While the previous section on *kawman*-level PCIA analysis surfaces some natural changes (notably related to negative peace), most of these are not enough to address the root causes of conflict, highlighted by the fact that most conflict actors in the communities studied have chosen to migrate to Sabah and elsewhere in search of a better life.

- 18** | In the last five years, TSS and HD Centre have worked to expand from conflict mediation and settlement to education and livelihood support, notably through pilots funded by the Australian Government, namely the Pathways to Peace Program and the Asia Foundation-implemented ACCELERATE, respectively. In many ways, this is a continuation of the original design of the aborted Peace-Centered Community (PCC) model that was part of HD Centre's early-stage Armed Violence Reduction Initiative, which hoped to draw the attention of donors and government to invest in places that decided to stop conflict and engage in dialogue. While the seven PCCs⁶ were able to build on mediation and encourage the communities to set up 'peace zones' where residents collectively decide to ban the open display of firearms and the wearing of uniforms, the initiative ended after 2012, following project funds drying up and early discussions with the Department of the Interior and Local Government regarding the mainstreaming of these guidelines at the national level did not prosper.
- 19** | While the Pathways and ACCELERATE projects are early-stage pilots at this point, they indicate that leveraging trust built through mediation and security coordination can open doors to development. The education pilot worked with the children of MNLF widows whose husbands died in the Zamboanga Siege as well as children of ASG members, with a proposed but as-yet unfunded second round working with Sama-Badjau and Sama-Dilaut children who are unable to go to school due to social stigma as sea gypsies. The ACCELERATE project, on the other hand, has begun a second phase of work with targeting windows for small and micro-enterprises run by senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and indigenous peoples. An early win is the 2023 inclusion of Upper Sinumaan, Talipao as a beneficiary site, given its infamous history as an ASG camp.

⁶ Seven barangays were declared as PCCs in the municipalities of Parang, Omar, Kalingalang Caluang, and Indanan.

- 20** | **However, in order to be sustainable, education and livelihood support must be consistent, and linked to broader processes that can address widespread economic displacement, political disenfranchisement, as well as outstanding legal issues particularly for actors with outstanding warrants.** Concretely, this means that peace dividend work must go beyond pilots, ideally tracked in parallel to the respective local governments' Comprehensive Development Plans and their M&E systems. *Pagbanta* remains an issue for operations, with cases of live clan conflicts preventing beneficiaries from participation (and therefore leading to new cases being endorsed to TSS), as well as evidence of women still suffering from trauma.

Conclusion and recommendations

- 21** | **Respondents acknowledged the continuing relevance and value of HD Centre and TSS's work on clan conflict mediation and coordination.** The neutralization of more than 200 local wars is seen as having a sizeable contribution to an island-society of just 1 million people, ensuring the link between grassroots concerns and the broader conversations at the peace tables with the MNLF and the MILF. However mediation is not a silver bullet, as its parameters do not include addressing root causes and triggers, or the necessary political, legal, and socio-economic packages for follow-through. Sulu is still ranked as the poorest province in the Philippines, with many respondents highlighting how much of its decline can be traced to the 1974 Burning of Jolo, when urban warfare between the Philippine Constabulary and the MNLF plunged what was once a prosperous, progressive, and well-educated area into where it is today. This underscores the need for sustained engagement as well as the necessary partnerships to ensure that the baseline relationships built through more than a decade's worth of investment and dialogue do not go to waste.
- 22** | **The section below enumerates lessons and recommendations addressing the key challenges of sustainability, replication, and strengthening local monitoring, evaluation, and learning**

efforts. These has implications for other actors working in the Bangsamoro as well as other operational contexts facing post-agreement challenges.

On sustainability

- **While the TSS experience shows the relative advantages and disadvantages of keeping security coordination informal, there is a need to formally codify arrangements with state institutions while continuing to strengthen local civilian leadership.** Partners for engagement include the AFP, PNP, LGUs, BARMM, and the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) in the case of the JMSSC, and the Department of Justice (DoJ) in relation to signed local mediation arrangements and peace compacts.
- **An expanded and localised list of peace and conflict impact indicators can illustrate how community members measure tangible qualitative and quantitative improvements to their lives after mediation.** However, the two interventions most sought out by former parties to the conflict are (i) improved access to education for their children; and (ii) increased incomes, particularly through local livelihood opportunities that will not require family members to seek jobs elsewhere. To do so, education and livelihood support packages can be integrated into local development and security-related processes. Revisiting the PCC and Community Policing models for normalization previously piloted by TSS is recommended.
- **For hard-to-reach armed actors, continued policy dialogue regarding amnesties and pardons with outstanding warrants is key.** While these link to the mandates of the NationalAmnestyCommissionandtheMNLFTransformation Program, among other existing formal initiatives and joint mechanisms, greater localization and outreach is required.

On replication

- **While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to peacemaking, there are opportunities to apply lessons from Sulu in other localised contexts, particularly in building tools and protocols in managing horizontal intercommunal and inter-elite contestations.** In the case of the Bangsamoro peace processes, there is space to engage the GPH-MILF and GPH-MNLF peace architectures on the monitoring and mediation of other peace process-relevant conflicts. As part of its engagement in the GPH-MILF normalization agenda, HD Centre has begun working with TSS mediators in the six acknowledged camps in mainland Mindanao. At the regional level, the Office of the Chief Minister, the Office of the Bangsamoro Solicitor-General, BARMM-MPOS, BARMM-MILG and the BARMM Ministry for Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA) have mandates in relation to the Bangsamoro Justice System and alternative dispute resolution. Other mandates exist to review commitments on community policing, notably with MPOS, the local government units via MILG, and the BARMM's Peace, Security, and Reconciliation Office. On the other hand, land and resource-related contestation and dispute resolution mandates are lodged with various ministries working on Human Settlements and Development (MHSD), Agriculture, Fisheries, and Agrarian Reform (MAFAR), Environment and Natural Resources and Energy (MENRE), Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA), as well as the affected provincial, municipal, and *barangay* governments.
- **With dialogue and mediation as a measure of trust, there is a need to train and mentor the next generations of grassroots mediators.** In the case of the BARMM, this may be done in partnership with MPOS, but should be localised per province as appropriate.

On monitoring, evaluation, and learning

Increasingly localised peacemaking and peacebuilding over longer time periods point to the need for more locally-driven monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEAL) to capture progress and measure effects. With an integrated approach to delivery that looks at mediation and settlement not as a stand-alone activity, but in tandem with multi-stakeholder security coordination and post-settlement ‘peace dividends’—MEAL must shift beyond donor- and activity-specific monitoring frameworks, and expand towards local design logics. TSS’s shift to more independent activities provides an opportunity to review its internal M&E system and how it interfaces with HD Centre and contributing donors’ MEAL plans, while identifying internal or confidential variables. To do so, however, upfront investments are required, namely: basic cleaning, standardization, and reconstruction of datasets based on local logics, while strengthening local quantitative and qualitative capacities for MEAL.

About the author

Maria Carmen 'Ica' Fernandez is a development professional with over 14 years of experience in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies focusing on addressing the root causes of violence, supporting citizen power, improving service delivery, and increasing social cohesion. Her engagement in the Bangsamoro peace process includes prior work in the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP, now OPAPRU); advisory roles with various multilateral and bilateral development organisations, INGOs, and CSOs; as well as direct technical assistance to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and its precursor, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). She holds an MA in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of the Philippines Diliman and an MPhil in Planning, Growth and Regeneration from the University of Cambridge. As a final-stage PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge, her work focuses on the relationship between protracted internal displacement, customary property rights, and land governance.

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