

My Bangsamoro story: How young people can help to build peace

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A group of young people unite for peace in Mindanao. Photo by: [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#) / CC BY-NC-ND

I realized the value of peace when I was 10, when my older brother became one of many casualties of conflict between Philippine government and rebel forces.

Living in Cotabato City, an independent city bordering Maguindanao and Cotabato — the two provinces in Mindanao that turn into a battleground for these two forces, I used to wake up to the sound of OV-10 Bronco planes bombing areas near our community. We got used to the bombings, but the thought of one of these missiles dropping on our roof or stray bullets piercing our walls was never far from my mind.

The vicious cycle of conflict has trapped the Bangsamoro, a population of indigenous Muslims in the Philippines, in poverty and underdevelopment. According to a [World Bank study](#), each year of armed conflict between 1970 and 2001 cost the region 20 billion Philippine pesos (\$453 million) worth of damage to business and property and investment losses — 640 billion Philippine pesos all in all.

But it seems there are a few more roadblocks to hurdle before lasting peace can be achieved in the southern Philippines.

In January, an operation to capture Zulkifli Abdhir — more commonly known as Marwan — resulted in a clash between the Special Action Force members of the Philippine National Police and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mamasapano, Maguindanao. The hunt for Marwan, the alleged mastermind behind the 2002 bombings in Bali, Indonesia, and several other attacks in Mindanao, led to the deaths of 44 SAF members and the suspension of congressional hearings on the Bangsamoro Basic Law, the political component of a framework establishing an autonomous region in the south, which representatives from the Philippine government and MILF signed a year

ago.

Worse, the Mamasapano clash has triggered a strong call to stop the peace negotiations with the MILF.

Regardless of the overwhelming call for war from Manila, the stand of civil society, youths and nongovernmental organizations — including the Young Moro Professionals Network — from the conflict areas, the business sector and even the international community has been consistent: Legislation of the BBL is needed to address the grievances of the Bangsamoro people.

As a member of the secretariat of the Philippine government's peace negotiating panel, I know there is no silver bullet to attaining lasting peace in any conflict situation. But as a young development leader, I also know that the youth can be an integral part of this process. How? Here are five ways the youth can actively contribute to the peace-building process.

1. Understand the history of the conflict — and learn both sides.

In the case of the Bangsamoro conflict, read up on the history of the southern Philippines from the very beginning. The Bangsamoro struggle has been labeled as one of the longest-running conflicts in the world. Through this historical, economic and social standpoint, one could better understand why there is clamor for the right to self-determination and autonomy in these areas.

Having this kind of knowledge and clarity will not only bring to light certain misconceptions that such a long-running conflict can produce. It can also help and inform legislators and other stakeholders to better guide the conflict resolution process.

2. Read and follow the news. Stay updated.

Conflict situations are not static phenomena. They evolve, and the causes and effects change over time. In the Philippines, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro is not limited to the BBL alone — although it is unarguably the most significant component of the agreement as it can pave the way for an autonomous region with political and fiscal powers greater than the current ARMM.

But the CAB also contains a normalization component, which as the name implies seeks to normalize and achieve the desired quality of life in conflict-affected communities. This component seeks to implement socio-economic programs in the Bangsamoro, and transform MILF camps into productive civilian communities, among others.

Follow the news, and read the opinions of respected politicians, academics and other experts — from both sides of the debate — as they present some of the richest discourse about the topic. Doing so will not only keep you abreast of developments, but also help widen your perspective.

3. Discuss, and then act.

Share your insights and learnings to friends and peers, correcting their misperceptions and helping them have a more informed stand. The goal is two-pronged: enable better understanding of the issue at hand and increase the chances of finding concrete solutions.

Little things can matter too. As the project manager of a peace-building project called Peace for Reel supported by the U.S. government here in the Philippines, and with help from my colleagues, I try to promote peace by encouraging young cineastes to produce films tackling peace. Such activities are easily doable in other countries too.

4. Join conferences, lectures and programs advocating peace and cultural

exchange.

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— Al-Bari Macalawan, youth leader

Academic institutions and NGOs actively engage students and youths on a range of subjects, including peace building. Finding nearby universities and organizations holding such forums and programs often can easily be done by searching online.

Recently, I joined the Young Southeast Asian Leader's Initiative United for Peace, a program by the Obama administration to raise Southeast Asian youth awareness on peace and intercultural dialogue. The program taught me the importance of brotherhood, reciprocity and fraternity among different peoples irrespective of their beliefs and perspectives. Many more opportunities like this are out there if you take the effort to search and apply for it.

5. Start a peace project of your own or join one.

A few years ago, I organized the Pencil for Peace Project, an education drive to help primary school children in a conflict-affected area in Pened, Maguindanao. Through the help of the intercultural program called the American Field Service network in the Philippines, we were able to distribute 100 kits to the school.

Starting a project is difficult but with the help of friends and passionate volunteers, you can help other people's lives in significant ways. It doesn't have to be big; a recent project by an advocacy group went viral even if it only involved Muslims shaking hands with passing strangers. The project aimed to reduce negative cultural misconceptions about Muslims, given the rise of militant groups.

If you don't have the time to organize a project, just join one. Social media is a good platform to search for projects like this, and one the youth can very well know how to leverage.

Want to learn more? Check out the [Youth Will website](#) and tweet [#YouthWill](#).