Grassroots Peace Building : The KFI Experience

KFI started to engage in grassroots peace building in late 90's through an emergency relief work in Barangay Bual, Isulan, Sultan Kudarat. With funding support from Catholic Relief Services (CRS), KFI provided relief goods to some 200 Moro families who fled to the town center (Isulan) after their houses were burned by loose armed group. Earlier Muslim-Christian relationship in this barangay became bitter due to unresolved land conflicts. Killings on both sides started to take place until the situation went out of control and the tragic event of arson happened in 1999.

The relief work was followed by an effort to send back the IDPs home. It lasted for nearly six months before the IDPs finally returned after a series of consultation and dialogues. Then rehabilitation work started. KFI together with the LGU of Isulan provided shelter and some infrastructure to the victims as soon as they returned home.

After settling the IDPs back home, KFI and CRS realized that sending them back home with rehabilitation project would not be enough. How can we bring back the good relationship? Reflecting on this question KFI and CRTS started to organize peace education in the communities. And within two years, the situation improved and the communities started to co-exist peacefully again. As a result of the peace education, the community decided to declare their barangays as a zone of peace. During the official declaration, all the stakeholders including the military, representative from the rebel forces, the police, municipal officials and barangays leaders were present.

To date the communities are managing a cooperative (SAMAKANA) together which serves as a venue for cooperation and mutual learning for both the Moro and Christian settlers in the barangay. The peace education and organizing work is also being expanded to the adjacent 5 barangays.

Learning from this experience, KFI with CBCS and CRS tried to duplicate the same experience in Carmen among 14 barangays. Though the context may be slightly different, the peace building framework became relevant in the Carmen experience. The Carmen experience piloted a peace education for the tri-people (Moro, IPs and Christian settlers). Inter-communal violence were taking place in many barangays of Carmen. This

is the result of the dragging wars between government forces and rebel groups. In all these wars, the civilians (of the tri-people) had always been the victims.

Like in the Bual experience, the local peace building in Carmen started with relief and rehabilitation work. This was followed by education and consultation among IDPs until a summit was convened where the IDPs declared their position to continue strengthening themselves against violence in their communities.

In Carmen, the residents of four barangays have declared their respective barangays as zones of peace. The other barangays which had been initially organized also indicated their desire to declare zones of peace. The 14 barangays are now preparing to organize themselves into an alliance for peace in Carmen.

To do even local peace building is not an easy task. It requires patience ansd also determination and belief in the work. It is also risky. In all these efforts we were once suspected to be anti-revolutionaries or anti-government. By helping declared zones of peace in those barangays, the rebels suspected us, on one hand, of limiting their areas of operation/movements and the government on the other hand suspected us of harboring rebels within the zones of peace or disallowing them to run after rebels inside the ZoP. It took us time to convince the parties (government and rebel forces) that we are neither pro-military or pro-rebel.   Towards the end, we were able to prevail upon them and convinced them to become signatories to the agreement.

The Zones of Peace

What can the zones of peace do in the middle of a big war? This sis always the question we got from people who do not believe in the one of peace at this point time. The ZoP is not the end of the peace building work. It gives people areas and opportunities to work for their development without much worries on hostilities. ZoPs will not work out if the communities will not cooperate in making it work. Policies of co-existence and cooperation are outlined in the policies of the ZOPs. The success of the ZoPs depends on the cooperation of all the stakeholders.

The Challenge

It is sometimes difficult to determine exactly when can we say that there is a post conflict era. The vulnerability of areas to conflict makes it difficult to declare an area as a post-conflict community. Many times in the past, areas believed to have been seen as a post-conflict communities became hosts to several violent conflict afterwards. In Carmen, projects such as rebuilding shanties for returning IDPs has to be abandoned again because of a renewed hostilities. In Pikit, a declared zone of peace was abandoned after a renewed war took place.

In Datu Piang, several projects were implemented in several areas after a heavy war between the AFP and rebel forces. Some of them included health center, literacy center and livelihood program. Later on an inter-communal violence (rido) among private armed groups (loose command) took place and the areas have to be abandoned again. Post conflict intervention therefore means any activities intended to respond to the need of the communities after war. This does not mean the areas will be a permanent no conflict areas.

This is one problem area but also a gray area for NGOs to explore. There is no assurance that a post-conflict communities will never experience violence or war again. This gives the impression that the bigger efforts of peace and development shall be complemented by local initiatives for grassroots peace and development goals. The effort to improve the living conditions of the communities must be coupled with the effort to make them understand the sources of conflicts so that they become empowered and organized to protect their interests. Projects must not be a source of violence among the communities. Empowering the communities to protect their areas from being involved in hostilities is the heart of peace building work.