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Identity-building and Democracy in the Philippines: National Failure and Local Responses in Mindanao

Hannah Neumann

Abstract: The case of the Philippines provides an interesting example of how post-colonial governments in Southeast Asia are trying to govern multi-ethnic nations. The Philippines, despite being the country in Asia with the most vibrant civil society, is still dealing with a war on the southern island of Mindanao – a war fuelled by, rather than abated by, national dynamics of identity-construction and social practices of democracy. This paper looks into these protracted national dynamics and their influence on the conflict in Mindanao. It further contrasts those with local, predominantly civil-society-based, approaches of identity re-construction and decision-making that have changed the situation for many communities on the ground, but that haven't so far had much impact on the national setting. Therefore, the final part of the paper assesses the impact of local civil-society initiatives and draws conclusions on how those could provide blueprints for national solutions and complement high-level peace talks.

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Keywords: Philippines, Mindanao, civil society, democracy, identity

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Introduction

Democracy. Well, I suppose sometimes it could be a convenient term to use. [...] sometimes it can be a tyranny of the majority. Not because of reason or because of what is right or what is good for the people, but basically it boils down to self-interest, but it is all sugar-coated in a way. This is democracy, we have elections. [...] So democracy is just a beautiful word. But in the Philippines it is sadly abused (Professor at Notre Dame University Cotabato, interviewed in Cotabato, April 2009).

In nearly all post-colonial societies, the political system, as well as the nation, was constructed using a top-down approach.¹ Even today, governments face the challenge of building some notion of national identity among their countries' various cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups and often face violent opposition from within. Most of these governments are strongly encouraged by the international community to build their nations following the guidelines of democratic processes, implementing minority rights and pushing for consociational approaches. According to popular democracy indices, such as Freedom House or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index,² the Philippines score higher on these issues than many other countries in Southeast Asia. But the war in Mindanao and the recent breakdown of the 2008 peace talks there provide an illustrative example of how a democratic constitution and a multi-party parliament with strong local stakeholders have failed to resolve identity conflicts and, in fact, even seem to fuel them. The situation is bleak: civil war since 1972, three "all-out wars" since 1996, up to 140 million EUR spent by the state yearly on war, and more than 1 million people displaced (Williams 2009: 122). As this paper will show, all of these developments are the bitter result of a failure on the national level to democratically rule a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. The civil war, ongoing for 40 years now, has so far resisted any attempt – by the government, by the opposing groups or by civil society – to be finally brought to an end. Rather, continuous circles of war–negotiation–war are increasing frustration on all sides and decreasing the legitimacy of all groups involved.

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- 1 I would like to thank Stephan Giersdorf and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier parts of the paper, as well as Eduardo Santoyo, Schola Mutua and Omar Unggui for their support during field work.
 - 2 For such a comparison, see the Bertelsmann data: <<http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/457.0.html>> and the Freedom House data, where the Philippines have been rated as "Free" from 1996 to 2005, during the "all-out wars", online: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/CompHistData/FIW_AllScores_Countries.xls>.

To understand why this internal conflict has persisted, it is helpful to look back at the history of the country.

First, the paper will retrace the evolution of different layers of identity in the Philippines – family before ethnicity, before religion, and before nation – that encouraged the outbreak of violence in Mindanao in 1968. Second, it will explain why the democratic system prevalent in the country today has consistently and dramatically failed to manage the conflict, and even contributes to its persistence through paternalistic politics and non-implementation of national laws and development plans. Bringing these two levels of analyses together, the article describes some central reasons for the persistence of violence – marginalization of minorities, closure of the political arena for protest, failure of the nation-state to represent all citizens, and annulments of national peace agreements.

These remarks will be contrasted by local responses to the ongoing violence and paralysis on the national level. Focusing on one community in the Cotabato province, one of the most contested regions in Mindanao, local approaches to democracy and identity-building will be portrayed.³ These approaches present a mix of traditional and modern ideas, they are strongly connected to the local “life-worlds”, and they provide an alternative to the vacuum created by the failure on the national level. Although those local approaches alone might not guarantee change on a national level or even bring the war to an end, a closer look at how to manage conflict in a non-violent way with multi-ethnic approaches can provide a blueprint for how big solutions and national peace deals could be translated into, or even proceeded by, realistic implementation procedures. To that end, the final part of the paper will discuss the actual and possible future impact of such alternative local approaches on the national level.

The Conflict in Mindanao

In the colonial history of the Philippines, two different kinds of colonialism were prevalent: that of conquest and that of settlement (Kreuzer and Weiberg 2007). Colonialism of conquest aims to exploit populations and resources and integrate captured countries into the colonizer’s own econ-

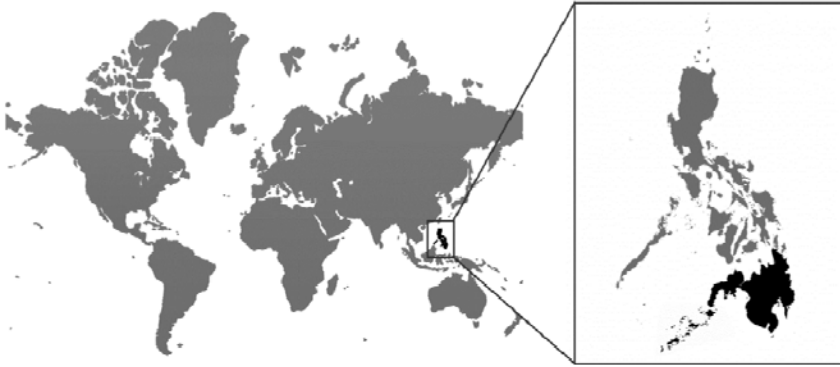
3 The data for this part is based on in-depth field work by the author done in 2004 and 2009. It summarizes field notes, 30 interviews conducted within a local community and with key figures surrounding it, five focus group discussions with community inhabitants, and the observations of five Mindanaoan students from Notre Dame University in Cotabato. At this point, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Prof. Eduardo Santoyo, Prof. Estella Cantallopez and Prof. Alano Kadil (all from NDU Cotabato) to this project.

omy, thereby making them strongly economically dependent. This creates a disadvantage for the colonized and may leave a negative legacy for the post-colonial state. But the dependency can be brought to an end by anti-colonial struggles, as in the case of the Philippines, which rose up against Spain. Settler colonialism, in turn, offers no opt-out options. This type of colonialism is based on the settlement of large amounts of people from central to peripheral regions, annexing vast tracts of land and creating a new social order, different and independent from indigenous organizations. In the case of the Philippines, the Americans, as well as the Filipino government itself later on, encouraged large parts of the Christian population from the North to settle in Mindanao, to “civilize the savages” and cultivate vast tracts of land. This sudden immigration endangered the social, political, and economic practices of Mindanaoans.⁴ While in 1903, 76 per cent of Mindanaoans were Muslims, in 1990, it was only 19 per cent, and 80 per cent of those were landless tenants (Dictaan-Bang-oa 2004: 154). Today, Christian settlers do not only dominate in numbers, but also in socio-economic development and political power (Stankovitch 2003). In this second type of colonialism, de-colonization would only be possible by returning land and re-establishing political self-determination, which is what the Muslim groups are fighting for (Kreuzer and Weiberg 2007: 341-342).

The latest outbreak of political violence between the government of the Philippines and the most prominent Muslim rebellion force (Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF), in August 2008, is a consequence of these marginalizing developments (Kreuzer 2008a; Williams 2009). The situation escalated after the MoA-AD (Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domains) was not ratified by the national government, and the conflict is still ongoing at low intensity today. This memorandum was the result of a joint panel of representatives of the MILF and the national government as well as academic experts. It summarized all previous agreements between the two warring groups and should have served as a roadmap to peace. Shortly before the designated signing date of the document in Malaysia, two Christian governors from Mindanao appealed to the Supreme Court to declare the whole process unconstitutional and discourage the president from signing it (Bernas 2008; Jurand 2008).

4 The Gini-Coefficient in Mindanao is the highest within the Philippines (~50, compared to 44 nationwide) and has even increased since the end of the Marcos regime. Separate data on the income difference between Muslims and Christians, especially going back to the 1930s, is not available, but within Mindanao, it is the predominantly Muslim provinces which are poorest. Overall, the poverty rate in Mindanao is the highest within the Philippines at 63 per cent, the national level rate is 34 per cent (Source: <www.census.gov.ph>).

Figure 1: Philippines and Mindanao in a Global Context



Source: Author's own compilation.

The Supreme Court ruled in accordance with their appeal and criticized the MoA-AD as having departed too far from the constitution (Bernas 2008).⁵ As much as this process seems to prove that democracy and separation of powers in the Philippines is alive and well, as we dig deeper, we can see that this process actually brings up two issues discussed later on in the paper: the fragmentation of the political landscape that made constitutional change before the MoA-AD decision impossible, and a violent mix of private and political issues – in this case, by one of the two governors who appealed to the Supreme Court and who owns vast tracts of land in Mindanao, which might have been redistributed if the MoA had been implemented.

This mix of political and private issues is fuelling a second conflict line in Mindanao – namely, that between different clans of usually Muslim origin fighting for power and resources on local level. Clans constitute the primary level of organization and belonging in the Muslim society in Mindanao, and clans still play an important role in the local and regional political setting. The latest incident of clan-related violence that figured prominently and seemed to have opened a new dimension is the so-called “Maguindanao Massacre”, supposedly part of a long-lasting clan feud, in which 57 men and women, approximately half of them journalists, were killed and buried by a roadside in Mindanao on 23 November 2009 (Gutierrez 2009).

5 Especially the powers envisioned for the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity go beyond those of local governments or even the ARMM, making it, according to the Supreme Court, a quasi-autonomous state.

1 National Failure

On the national level, there are two main lines of explication for these developments: (1) identity-construction at the national level, making the Muslims the necessary counter-identity to construct an otherwise unified nation, and (2) a democracy overshadowed by social practices of clan alliances and familial oligarchies.

1.1 Identity-construction at the National Level

[...] it would be an act of great injustice to cast our people aside, turn our country over to the Filipino people in the North to be governed by them, without our consent, and the thrust upon us a government not of our own people, nor by our own people, nor for our own people (Petition of the Mindanaoans to the President of the United States of America in 1921, cited according to Jubair 1999: 293).

The experience of post-colonial and transitional societies regarding the nexus between state and citizens is a challenging one. States were externally created as administrative units, but they often lacked citizens who identified with this newly built nation. National history, in the case of the Philippines, provides a strong example of this bad fit and the resulting marginalization. History is usually presented in the form of a narrative: the fulfilment of a project, stretching back over centuries, during which there are moments of self-awareness that prove to be decisive in the manifestation of a national personality, where the present can be seen as a “continuing past”. Such moments could be battles, intense trade relations, or anti-colonial fights. Unfortunately, the Philippines as a whole doesn’t have such a history (Bankoff and Weekley 2002: 92-93). The Christian parts, especially the northern island of Luzon, have a small history of “Filipino national resistance” that led to the 1898 Declaration of Philippine Independence from Spain and continues to be celebrated today. But as that struggle was a predominantly Christian and Tagalog⁶ one, the nation-building project was patterned along this Christian, Tagalog image (Coronel-Ferrer 2005: 7), culminating in the American-derived values of democracy and individual freedom (Bankoff and Weekley 2002: 95), coupled with the Spanish legacy of Christianity. Christianity became the corner-stone of the nation, symbolically excluding religious minorities (approximately 15 per cent of Filipinos). This marginalization stabilized a new, collective counter-identity, unifying

6 Tagalog, the ethnic group living in the region in and around Manila, led the national resistance. Their vernacular was later on made the national language (Tagalog), although most Filipinos speak Visayan.

the different ethnic and tribal groups of the Muslim religion into the *Moros*, who then began to fight for their own *bangsamoro* (*bangsa* = nation) in a hostile Christian land.

Colonial resistance in Moro lands differed from that of the Christian Tagalogs against the Spanish in time-frames, historical nodes, methods, objectives, symbols, and leaders. Resistance in Mindanao took place in territories that escaped effective administrative control of Spain and were not assimilated into the colonial culture; meaning they retained their communal traditions, practices and belief systems (Coronel-Ferrer 2005: 7). The history of Mindanao is one of strong resistance to all colonial powers and later invasions from “the North”.⁷ Because Spain never exercised effective sovereignty over these areas, it has even been argued that the Bangsamoro territories are not part of what were ceded by Spain to the United States in the 1898 Treaty of Paris (Lingga 2007: 42). Although officially annexed, the Moro indigenous modes of land ownership, control and use even persisted through the American colonial period (Abreu 2005: 104-105), which finally led the Mindanaoans to suggest in a 1921 petition to the president of the United States that they become part of the United States rather than unify with other Philippine islands to form a Filipino nation (Jubair 1999: 293). These claims to a Moro identity and finally a Moro nation are founded on several grounds: common racial origins (Indo-Malayan); common religion (Islam); shared history (more than 400 years of resistance against Spanish colonialism to defend their faith, people, and homeland); organized government in the form of sultanates; and a defined territory (Mindanao, Palawan, and Sulu) (Coronel-Ferrer 2005: 12-13).

To establish the vision of a unified Filipino nation against this strong resistance from the South, the North determined it had only two options to solve “the Moro problem”: either make the Moros disappear physically (by state-engineered demographic marginalization) or make them disappear culturally in a process of assimilation (Kreuzer 2006: 47). Thereby the Muslims gradually became the “significant other” needed to establish an otherwise homogenous national identity.⁸ In the Philippines, this “other”,

7 Referring to the islands to the north of Mindanao, predominantly Luzon and the Visayas, where most of the settlers came from. But also Spanish and American colonialism started in the North and gradually expanded down to Mindanao.

8 Aside from the Muslims, the Lumads (Indigenous) have their own struggle for self-determination (Dictaan-Bang-oa 2004: 163), but until lately did not manage to make their voices heard in the national and international political arenas. They had been incorporated by some of the Moro rebel groups as the “small or young brother of the Moros” (Jubair 2007: 101-102), but at the present, they are continuously framing and pursuing their own agenda and trying to get access to and a voice in national peace talks between the MILF and the government of the Philippines.

whether external or internal, Spaniard, American, Muslim, or Chinese, has always proven a useful counterpoint in the manufacturing of national identity (Bankoff and Weekley 2002: 3). The current Moro armed conflict is the sharpest expression of this clash between two imagined nations or nationalisms, Filipino and Moro, each with their own narrative of the conflict: For the Moro revolutionary movements, it is all about the conscious struggle to regain historical sovereignty of the independent Moro states; for the Philippine nation-state, it is a matter of defending territorial integrity against secession (Mastura 2007: 142-143).

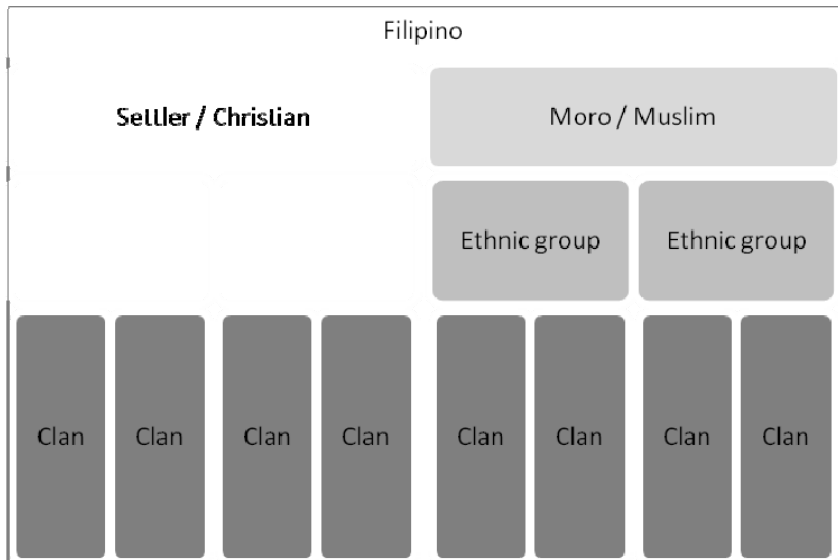
But Moro identity is not as consistent as it seems, seen from the national prism of antagonism. Centuries-old clan and ethnic structures strongly persist beneath this overarching identity vision and surface from time to time. Asking Muslims about their identity, a clear and surprisingly consistent hierarchy appears:⁹ The most important level of identification is that of *clan* affiliation or kinship ties. Second is *ethnic* group (being a Maguindanaoan, a Maranao or a Tausug), third is *religious* identity (being a Muslim), fourth, closely interwoven with third, is being a Moro, based on *political* activity as a Muslim, and in fifth place finally comes being a *Filipino*, resulting from the historical process of attempts to integrate and assimilate Muslims into national political bodies (Guilal 1998: 161). Filipino identity is seen as a by-product of alien domination. Many Filipino Muslims see themselves as “Filipinos only by document”. They feel they have no choice but to write Filipino as their citizenship in processing legal papers such as birth and residence certificates, particularly in applying for jobs in government or private agencies. In fact, many people in far-flung communities do not even have such certificates because for them, these are just pieces of paper which legitimize government intervention in their lives (Guilal 1998: 163).

Moro and Muslim identity are inseparable (Guilal 1998: 163). Islam by now serves as a centripetal force in the different dimensions of Mindanao Muslims’ lives – political, economical and socio-cultural aspects. There is the “political marriage” between one’s religious identity as a Muslim on the one hand, and one’s socio-political existence on the other hand. The common perception of marginalization and oppression through demographic and socio-economic decline unified the Muslim clans and Muslim ethnic groups. This resulted in the evolution of a common identity as “Moros”, along which Muslim Mindanaons were politically mobilized as a unified group; first on elite level and later on at grassroots level. This new category by no means replaces traditional identity-construction along clan lines, but rather

9 The following data is based on research by Wahab Ibrahim Guilal in 1998 entitled “Perceptions on Democracy and Citizenship in Muslim Mindanao”, based on key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and a review of literature.

integrates them. Being a Moro means being loyal to one’s family and ethnic group, but in addition, being a member of the newly created political identity: the transnational Islamic community (*ummah*) (Kreuzer 2003: 5; Mastura 2007: 144). But basic social and political identities continue to be imagined in the context of the clan structure in Muslim Mindanao (Kreuzer 2005: 25). Although Muslims are united in their belief in Islam, they differ in terms of social outlook, norms, values and traditions according to clan and ethnic group.¹⁰

Figure 2: Identity Levels among Christian and Muslim Mindanaoans



Note: The settlers belong to various different ethnic groups, as do the Moros, but this plays only a minor role in identity-construction. Being Filipino and a settler in Mindanao serves as the unifying identity dimension.

Source: Author’s own compilation.

10 Guilal 1998: 171. This has become visible lately in the discussion after the non-ratification of the MoA-AD where a number of Muslim leaders openly criticized the agreement as biased and in favour of only a few of the ethnic subgroups that together make up the Moro movement (Kreuzer 2010: 13-15).

1.2 Social Practices of Democracy on a National Level

Clan politics is very strong, also democracy is a form of legitimacy for power-grab. Meaning, if you have money, you have guns, goons and gold – as they call it the three Gs – you can aspire for power (Local NGO worker cited according to Kreuzer 2005: 20).

The way democracy is expressed in the Philippines has fuelled the conflict rather than abated it. The Philippines, like many other post-colonial states, inherited the political system of its colonizer, in this case a distinctly American pattern of decentralized democracy¹¹ in which regular and competitive elections are of high importance. Further, local agencies of the state are subordinate to elected municipal mayors and provincial governours, a hierarchy that guarantees that the accumulation and mobilization of local personal followers remains a key source of political power, just as it had been in pre-colonial Southeast Asia (Hedman and Sidel 2000: 170).

Sure enough, we now have free elections, free speech, free assembly.
But these are the empty shells of democratic institutions, because the real essence of democracy does not exist here (Sionil 2004: 50).

To better analyse the reasons for these gaps between aspiration and reality, it is important to differentiate between the constitutional and institutional set-up of democracy on the one side and social practices accompanying it on the other. “Hard facts” such as constitutional set-up, laws, and the institutional system measured by most polity indices can hardly explain the failure of democracy. Therefore, looking at “soft indicators” becomes necessary. Those indicators refer to the social practices of democracy and try to capture how local actors understand decision-making processes and communicate with each other as well as outsiders based on their cultural background and experiences (Kreuzer 2008b: 40).

Looking at these social practices of everyday decision-making leads us to remark that partaking in politics in the Philippines is understood as a necessity for any family or clan to reach its maximum profit and increase the “assets of its kin” (Kreuzer 2005: 4-7).¹² Early socialization processes lay the

11 It is decentralized in so far as the district/ municipality has a strong basis, but on the other hand, it is directly dependent on the national government. What is lacking in the case of the Philippines is an intermediate/ regional level of political organization.

12 In a 2009 survey by Transparency International, Filipinos see their political parties and public officials as the most corrupt aspects of society – scoring a 4 on a scale from 1 (not corrupt) to 5 (extremely corrupt) – and 77% of the interviewed judge their government to be ineffective in fighting corruption. Online: <<http://www.transparency.org/content/download/43788/701097>>. Adding the data of the

foundation for this system, and enculturation reinforces fundamental values of (not only) Christian Filipino society, establishing the basis for a highly reciprocal social life. *Utang na loob* (an unpayable “debt of gratitude”) defines the lasting moral obligation created when one accepts a voluntary gift or service. *Hiya* refers to a complicated concept of shame, where an individual loses his/her *hiya*, when he/she fails to repay his/her “debt of gratitude” and is then considered a shameless person (*walang hiya*). As a result, another major value is the avoidance of conflict, or *pakikisama* (getting along).

In summary, social existence among most Christian Filipinos is much concerned with intragroup cohesion; the individual receives sustenance and security within this system in return for its defense (Lebar 1972: 21).

The most important group within the Christian Filipino system is the nuclear family, although “family” is often defined as including a huge number of cousins and uncles. The individual is integrated into a family/ clan¹³ either by descent or through a complex system of parenthood, brotherhood, sponsorship, reciprocal obligations, associational ties, and proven friendships (Lebar 1972: 20-21).

These alliances form a crucial link between average citizens and the country’s elites; they are not only reflected in private life but also in the political sphere. In a society where personal ties are most important, citizens are often suspicious of politicians or officials unknown to them personally. As a result, the system seems to lack order and is instead characterized by “randomness and chaos, with the only operative force being social ties underlying privilege” (Chikiamco 1998: 17) – privilege being constantly reproduced through licit and illicit practices of familial relationships. In clan-centred orders, the chances that an individual could successfully function – politically, socially, or financially – outside the clan structure is nearly impossible because these clans are the central forces behind all aspects of life: family, politics, economics, security, and dispute-settlement (Collins 2004: 232) – and that is true for Muslim *and* Christian Filipinos. This makes such “cultural behaviour” of complex transactions of debt and obligation among extended family or clan members a “rational economic strategy” (Bankoff and Weekley 2002: 77), reinforced by brutal force. Local Christian

Asian Barometer, the picture becomes even more consistent. Here, only 10% of Filipinos are “consistent democrats”, the lowest rate in Southeast Asia, pointing to a “very thin cultural legitimization for democracy” (Chu and Huang 2009: 13).

13 Whereas the term “family” usually refers to a relationship by descent, “clan” has a broader meaning (see definition below), but this difference is of little importance in terms of actual behaviour.

and Muslim rulers act as strongmen, commanding dozens of armed men that stand under no other command (Kreuzer 2005). Such social patterns undermine any notion of nationhood or political organization, as well as democratic procedures, which go beyond family ties and personal relationships.

This reliance on clans is reflected in national politics, and is characteristically described as “kinship politics of an oligarchic nature” (Kreuzer 2006: 31), a “collection of clan alliances” (Abinales 2002: 613), or “an anarchy of families” (McCoy 2009). Political families randomly try to convert the state and its institutions into “hangers-on of the family” (Kreuzer 2006: 55). They tie economic, social, and political power together in their hands, and as administration is not independent of the state, this results in an encompassing politicization of the state and its agencies. The infiltration of political families into all domains of the state undermines the central democratic principle of separation of powers as well as power-restraining differentiation along functional spheres (Kreuzer 2008b: 48). Political families prefer other families or family-like organizations as political opponents since they, too, have a vital interest in stabilizing the order in which families have a key political position (Kreuzer 2006: 55). Coalitions are unstable, formed between different oligarchic families, oriented along the need for the smallest-needed majority and usually “bought together” by particular deals (Kreuzer 2008b: 49). Such fragmentation of political actors and the particularity of their (family organized) political and economic interests, opposes any other successful form of collective organization in groups that are not part of the ruling oligarchy (Kreuzer 2008b: 49). Interests, reflected in the oligarchic system, can be pursued in this system, but not interests based on different structures, such as ethnicity. Interethnic conflict management therefore is subordinate to safeguarding elite rule; a slow pace of change (in anything having to do with political processes) enables elites to adapt to the necessary social change (Kreuzer 2006: 50). Ethnic protest is without representation in the political sphere, which in the case of Mindanao, led to marginalization, societal protest, and finally, violent rebellion.

The same is the case in the Muslim regions of Mindanao. Clan-based organization translates the centuries-old *datu*¹⁴/ sultanate system into the new democratic constitution. In the sultanates, community was based on village-family or clan organization. Within this social formation, there was no pre-conceived monopoly of power; what prevailed was a personal attachment of the governed to the ruler, but the latter had no constitutional

14 A *datu* is a traditional Muslim leader. Often, religious and political leadership was unified in one person.

authority. In Mindanao, authority and cohesion manifested themselves, just as in general Filipino society, along a complex system of personal, family, and clan loyalties (Guilal 1998: 164-165). The *loob/ biya* system finds its reflection in the indigenous *bangon* (or *maratabat*) system. The underlying logic is one of raising one's life and dignity through a continuous exchange of services and through having ties to the sultans or *datus* (either through relationship or descent). This leads to social pressures imposed by elders in the community in order to maintain a peaceful co-existence and a harmonious way of life within the community (Guilal 1998: 161, 168), but it can also lead to massive escalations when fighting occurs between the communities/clans (clan feuds).

In national politics, the traditional Muslim elite collaborated (by necessity) with the Filipino state by adopting the logic of electoral politics, including the "wheeling-and-dealing involved in intra- and inter-party politics" (Coronel-Ferrer 2005: 11-12). Just as with the rural Christian Filipino, the concept of democracy and citizenship enshrined in most Muslims is reduced to mere participation in elections (Guilal 1998: 171); although actual choosing of candidates is usually done in a collective manner where command votes are a widely accepted phenomenon (Kreuzer 2005: 20, 31). This adaptation of democratic rule in Mindanao increased marginalization on the national level. Oligarchic politics working through shifting alliances with the main power – concentrated in the presidency in Manila – clustered power among elites outside of the Moro ethnic communities. In the national parliament, Moros remained politically marginalized. Muslim elites managed to gain resources for their region, but their motivation was simply to strengthen their own paternalistic network. They worked not to improve the fundamental interests of their ethnic and/or religious group, but rather to distribute their financial means along paternalistic structures, strengthening their own positions within this kinship network. (Kreuzer 2008b: 49).

In the case of Mindanao, the government finds itself in a stalemate: The Moros have a historical right to self-determination and compensation of injustices, especially in terms of land, which is more and more supported by the international community. On the other side, Christians who have been living in this area since the early 1910s and have gained enormous political and economical power in turn could use this power to jeopardize the government. This leads to state policies full of inconsistencies. People are confused about the diverging views, actions, and offices of the government dealing with conflict and rebellion. Peace panels take one approach, the military has another tack, and usually both are junked by a higher authority (Lanos 2009). Within the military and government sectors, state

response is described (off the record) as the “ABCDE policy” – that is, appeasement, bribery, cooptation, dilly-dally, and engagement (Wadi 2000).

2 Local Responses

More than 40 years of conflict have seemingly not been enough to resolve the conflict at the national level, but those 40 years have created a fatigue among many of the ordinary citizens in the war-torn areas. Huge evacuations nearly every three years, constant fear of minor escalations on the ground, recurring loss of lives and property, and a continuous struggle to rebuild what will be destroyed by the next wave of violence are the consequences of these national developments everyone on the ground has to face – Muslim and Christian alike. In response to this situation, a number of civil-society initiatives¹⁵ started up in the late 1990s to push for alternatives to protracted national practices of democracy and identity-construction, initiatives widely accepted by the communities, as many of the programmes came with financial and logistical support. The overall record of these approaches is mixed, but some multi-ethnic communities have reached a level of stability and development within these insecure surroundings.¹⁶ One of them is the community of Nalapaan.

Nalapaan is a community in the municipality of Pikit that was one of the strongest hit regions in the wars of 1997 and 2000, leading to huge evacuations and vast devastation of land and buildings. Its location close to a strategic highway between Cotabato (capital of ARMM¹⁷) and Davao (main city in Mindanao) makes it vulnerable to attack. Due to this circumstance, the community, even compared to others in Mindanao, is rather poor. Its inhabitants are mostly farmers; its older people usually have not attended school and most of its younger people have only gone to elementary schools, ending at grade four. All three main groups live in Nalapaan; Muslims (73 per cent), Christians (24 per cent) and Indigenous (3 per cent). The first Christian settlements in this region date back to the early 1910s.

15 Local ones such as Tabang Mindanao, as well as international ones through their local staff (such as CRS or Oxfam).

16 Many of them have declared themselves so-called “peace zones” or “spaces for peace” and negotiated with the armed factions to remain off-limits to any form of armed hostility. In most cases, this temporarily limited ceasefire has been in place since 2000, even throughout the all-out war in 2003 (for more information on these communities: Neumann 2009a, 2010).

17 ARMM is the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, a territory mostly inhabited by Muslim Filipinos that was granted some autonomy rights during MNLF/GRP peace negotiations.

The first Christian settlers were, according to popular accounts, well received, and even today land is not a central issue in Nalapaan, although minor conflicts evolve around it, but they are not as protracted as those in other parts of the island. It is especially the political and economical marginalization that most Muslims describe as the source of their struggle.

All people of Nalapaan live in simple houses, usually one room housing four to eight members of the nuclear family. Electricity is only available to the very few living along the highway; water has to be collected from the few pumps. The only sources of income (aside from subsistence farming) are small *sari-sari stores* (which sell daily goods such as soap, chips or soda in small quantities to neighbours) or little plantings of mango and pineapple (Municipality of Pikit 2007). Life for the last forty years was characterized by war and displacement, loss and reconstruction, by the need to continue despite traumatic experience. Political decision had usually been delegated to religious and political leaders.

After the escalation in 2000, Nalapaan's inhabitants decided to work together to change this situation, at least within their very limited premises. They negotiated with all parties involved and reached a ceasefire agreement, not making their community a battleground anymore, as long as they, themselves, manage to resolve their internal conflicts without involving either the army or the MILF.¹⁸ Since the signing of this agreement in 2000, there has been no violent escalation inside the community. This led to a slow but steady development and a continuous implementation of NGO projects. Official sources emphasize these developments when comparing Nalapaan with other communities of Pikit: less crime (Chief of Police Elias Dandan, interviewed in Pikit 2009), more well-organized civil-society projects and relief services (Grace Cadundog, Department of Social Development and Welfare, interviewed in Pikit 2009), better absorption of government and NGO funds (Adele Nayal, project coordinator IRD, interviewed in Pikit 2009), since 2000, no more evacuations, and a place for evacuees from other communities (Bapa Butch, former MNLF commander, interviewed in Pikit 2009). This change is reflected in (1) a re-framing of identity and (2) a change in social practices of decision-making on the local level.

18 The process of reaching this ceasefire was a very challenging one. As it is not in the main interest of this paper to explain, more information can be found in: Neumann 2009b.

2.1 Re-framing Identity on a Local Level

Every family suffered after the war. [...] Life was very hard as we struggled to rebuild our lives from the scratch. Cases of salvaging and extra-judicial killings continued. There was no security and certainty to our life and our livelihoods.

As our response to the aforementioned situation and to strengthen the peace process and to restore the prosperity and peace we once enjoyed as a tri-people in our communities, we hereby DECLARE our *barangays* as Zones of Peace.

We dream of a life where there will be no more oppressors and oppressed. We aspire to restore our trust towards one another. We seek to rebuild our community life where love reigns, and where there is forgiveness and recognition of mistakes. We strive to build our community on good moral principles where one is faithful to one's religion and culture (Excerpts from the community declaration).

To be able to reach such intra-community stability, identity concepts as they exist on the national level needed to be re-framed. Analysing the data, four main aspects of redefinition can be identified:

1. Developing a common narrative and seeing joint approaches to conflict resolution as the only means to secure stability.
2. Introducing an integrative identity concept based on respect towards (not integration of) the other ethnic groups.
3. Disconnecting the community (as a place for economic cooperation and development) from the religious group (as a place for spiritual enrichment).
4. Creating a strong connection between the evolving concepts and the daily lives of the people.

(1) Different from those people on higher political levels, the usual inhabitant of Nalapaan has only suffered, not profited, from conflict. Continuous circles of evacuation led to a fatigue of war in which it was much easier to push forward with dialogue-oriented solutions as the only means to end war and the subsequent displacement. From the very beginning, this fatigue served as a connecting point in the re-creation of a community spirit; collective experiences of suffering and displacement were emphasized by the NGO activities. There was fear of what would happen to one's farm and family members, uncertainty of when a return to one's home would be possible, fear of returning too early or too late, and there was also a host of hunger and disease – issues affecting Christian, Muslim and Lumads alike. Starting from these very personal experiences, an integrative (though in

some points idealized) version of local and regional history was developed. Existing self-categorization of the people along clan, ethnic, and religious lines was accepted, but woven into a joint narrative of residents and newcomers, sharing their traditions for centuries¹⁹ and living side by side till the early 1960s. These collective traditions, as well as shared experiences during war, laid the foundation for the creation of a shared identity, no longer only as members of a particular ethnic group but as members of a community in which all suffered during war:

It can be said that the Mindanao Conflict is not an invention of the present time. It is a legacy left by the colonizers for the people of Mindanao to bear. The people of Mindanao are but victims of time and circumstances (Layson and Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute 2005).

Derived from this understanding and based on the enhanced willingness to cooperate to end displacement, joint councils and dialogue groups were set up on community levels in order to settle newly emerging conflicts between members of the different groups.

(2) An integrative identity frame developed in civil-society initiatives²⁰ was introduced – namely, that of “tri-people” identity, marked by mutual respect. Conceptually, it constitutes a new, all-encompassing layer of identity that is inclusive and recognizes religious differences, and at the same time, excludes all those intolerant and violent, making them the new counter-identity. It is based on a version of history that sees all Mindanaoans as victims of colonizing policies – Muslims, Lumads and Christians²¹ alike. It does not do away with the strong ties to one’s religious and ethnic group, but it serves, in most cases, as a remembrance to the joint struggle to overcome war. Such an integrative community focus was important to make use of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as restorative justice,

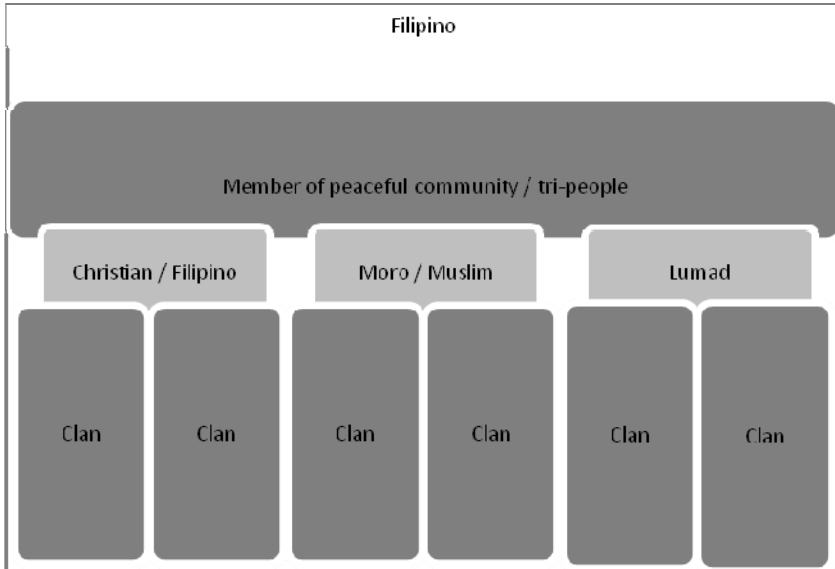
19 Although most of the settlers arrived in Pikit only after 1917, some Christians lived in the province already. The notion of living together for centuries might be an exaggeration of the facts, but it proves to be a consistent narrative throughout manuals, manifests, and popular accounts.

20 Strongest in this development since the early 1990s has been the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, which pushed forward a local adaptation of the UNICEF culture of peace manual in multi-ethnic teams, consisting mainly of historians from all three ethnic groups.

21 Whereas most of the Muslim and Lumad populations are direct victims of the settlements, the average Christian villagers are portrayed as victims as they were encouraged to settle in Mindanao by “some political will” and are now faced with the after-effects of war just as much as the other groups. This notion of Christians as victims does not extend to political leadership or militant groups.

which are based on the strong need to re-create harmony within one's community and restore broken relationships. Re-defining the community as consisting of all tribes allowed traditional procedures to work again in multi-ethnic settings and enabled local elders and decision-makers to deal with conflicts in line with local hierarchies and traditions.

Figure 3: Identity Levels among Peace Zone Members



Source: Author's own compilation.

(3) None of these inclusive approaches overcame religious divides prevalent in the community, nor did they try to. But what they achieved was a community focus (as opposed to a national focus), whereby the community was seen as a joint heritage that needs to be taken care of and in whose development all inhabitants can make a change. This collaborative concept disconnects two spheres of interaction that had before been forcibly connected: that of the community as a place for political and economic cooperation and development, and that of the ethnic and religious group as a place for spiritual enrichment. This concept of tri-people working together made it possible to keep strong ties with one's religious group and normative system and nevertheless cooperate towards community development in favour of all inhabitants. This new identity level, already by name (tri – including three groups, namely Christian, Muslim, and Lumad) made

each of the existing levels part of the new concept. This also allowed each group to continue living in their own preferred way, but establishing a set of ground rules for cooperative activities or cases of inter-ethnic conflict, replacing earlier (national) approaches of assimilation or conversion.

(4) The idea of reciprocal respect was embedded in a traditional framework: a multi-generational time-frame, where the lives of the members of the present generation are based on the achievements of their ancestors and lay the foundation for the lives of future generations. This enables community residents to see peace as a long-term process that their children and their children's children can benefit from. Such a "back to the roots" approach can also be found in many activities where daily actions were translated into metaphors to make abstract concepts more concrete and to build bridges over ethnic divides for specific endeavours. Often rather theoretical ideas of peace, conflict-transformation, identity or reconciliation are linked to a farming metaphor. Nearly all inhabitants of the peace zone are either full-time farmers (usually rice cultivation) or at least involved during harvest times (Municipality of Pikit 2007). The cyclical process of planting the seeds, waiting, harvesting, and planting again, as well as the knowledge of the many external factors influencing this process for the bad or good, forms an integral part of their life cycle and family organization. Many metaphors used in manuals and activities build on these omnipresent and natural phenomena, and were easily integrated into the daily vocabulary of the people.

The notion that peace still needs to develop and that this development needs external support is found in the phrase "planting the seeds of peace". Breakdowns are embedded into this picture as inevitable parts of such endeavours:

Yes, people are tired of violence and they want peace to come now.
But we say, "Many times *the seed doesn't see the flower*" (Price 2009: 6).

A comparable metaphorical field developed around the need for reconciliation and relationship-building. Aside from farming, the preparation of food plays an important role in daily life and is usually done in a central place within the house or garden in a huge pot. This process serves as a symbol for the tri-people relationship.

Peace in Mindanao is like *cooking food in the pot*. You need *three stones* to provide *support to the pot* before you could actually cook the food. You could not cook with only one stone, not even with two stones. You need three. And these three stones are the Muslims, Christians and the indigenous people. *Only then can you cook the food*. Only then can we have peace in Mindanao (Local Manobo elder, cited in Layson 2003).

Reconciling activities are meant to be “*mending the broken pieces*” or conceptualized as “*Mindanao on the mend*” (Mercado, Moran-Floirendo, and Anson 2003), where participants are motivated to mend an actual pot in a multi-ethnic team, a symbol revived in many community activities. In the same sense, many of the activities are conducted multi-ethnically, but are sectorally diversified. Farmers are learning with farmers how to improve their technology, mothers with mothers how to better nurture their children. The common aspects of the otherwise differing “life-worlds” serve as a bridge of cooperation in these contexts. Dialogue does not take place for dialogue’s sake, but with an actual component aiming to improve participants’ lives.

2.2 Changing Social Practices of Democracy on a Local Level

Even our water and sanitation project our public help has also a peacebuilding component. Because once they fight over the area where we construct the pump, we say stop the construction and do peacebuilding first. We talk together and we settle the conflict. [...] our engineer would say “Let’s stop the construction and we do peacebuilding first. [...] I think it’s a complementaring tool. I think the rehabilitation will not happen unless the relational gap is not resolved. [...] So we sit together, we handle with dialogue. And they are accepting it (Local NGO worker, interviewed in Pikit 2006).

This new community focus, linked to the willingness to communicate and cooperate again, led to a drastic change in social practices. Although Nalapaan is formally bound to the same constitutional and institutional system as other communities, its inhabitants opened up a space for community interaction, based not on religious/ ethnic divides, but on the mutual desire for non-violence and development. This changed existing social practices profoundly:

1. Activities are dialogue oriented, focusing not on the smallest-needed majority, but on the broadest possible inclusion.
2. Capacity-building training sessions with local leaders have enhanced the overall level of accountability and inclusion.
3. More information, bottom-up and top-down, through personal networks and mobile communication has increased the feeling of security and the possibility of participating in local and regional processes.
4. A two-level system differentiating between intra- and inter-group issues has developed.

5. Traditional approaches, especially those shared by Christians and Muslims, were revived and mixed with modern elements in election and jurisdiction processes.

(1) Because the entire initiative in Nalapaan was led by civil-society groups, there was basically no means of enforcing any of the decisions they made. From the very beginning of negotiations with the military and the MILF, communication has been dialogue based, trying to include as many stakeholders as possible, appealing to their integrity and commitment instead of bargaining over political or economic gains. This translated to community decision-making processes as well.

At the start, of course, it was not easy to us. Some people would not believe, some were not immediately convinced. So we have to show them our efforts. We have to talk to them – that this initiative needs your support. And of course the people are suffering poverty. So we also have to support them with economical assistance. We have to support them with farm inputs [...] so having them lead their farms, means that you help them getting their one day meal. [...] but then they see and they accept (Barangay Captain of Nalapaan, interviewed in 2006).

(2) *Barangay* decision-making, especially during war, was literally non-existent. Only few mayors had experience in local decision-making and democratic processes. Community councils only existed on paper, but never actually met (Community Family Service International 2003: 12-13). In Nalapaan, local decision-makers were trained and courses of action for decision-making developed.

We have a three-decision-making here. There is some decision that I have to decide immediately. That is the emergency decision. We have a decision that needs planning, that is where multi-sectoral or community planning that is very important. We have also the decision that I need, we and the *barangay* council need to sit together and talk. So for all of those things the process is very transparent. The only thing is in case of emergency where I need to decide on my own we already have that kind of allowance, leadership decision allowance where the community council will allow me (Barangay Captain of Nalapaan, interviewed in 2006).

(3) Communication and information networks were established to provide ordinary citizens with information about their situation, upcoming activities and projects, and security information. As only very few people own radios or televisions and information is biased and the quality often limited, Mindanao-wide tri-people networks and media institutions such as *Mindaneews*

and *Bantay Ceasefire* evolved. They provide neutral information on escalations, peace panels, and local developments to all stakeholders and gain reputation and credibility from their multi-ethnic teams. Further, NGO activities not only provide information and service to participants, but often serve as venues for discussion among the like-minded, as well as between the different ethnic groups. These new approaches have not eradicated the strong elite-based patterns of communication and political organization, but they have enabled ordinary citizens to speak out, at least in their respective ethnic groups or their respective sectoral groups.

(4) Because the situation after the outbreak of war²² was strongly influenced by the ethnic groupings, the set-up of various activities and processes no longer aimed to avoid the religious-identity dimension enforced by the conflict, but rather included it. Internal processes developed as rule-guided balancing of interests between the different religious groups. All those affairs that can be handled by the community itself followed the pattern of a two-level rights and obligations system. Those aspects, conflicts, or regulations that concerned the whole community of Nalapaan (minor crimes occurring between members of different groups, organization of community work, distribution of NGO projects) were handled in line with a common set of rules established by the council of elders, in some cases in cooperation with the inter-religious council. All other aspects concerning only members of one of the ethnic groups (such as crime involving only members of one ethnic group, organization of religious activities, compliance with traditional/ religious rules) were left to the organization of each group, its members and councils. This, especially, allowed different kinds of rules to be established for each group and different rulings to deal with offences against those. Allowing such a process of constant public bargaining based on tradition and values without oppressing either opened up a public space for interaction that led to creative forms of conflict resolution such as multi-ethnic councils of elders or processes of restorative justice, accepted by most inhabitants.

(5) Especially the latter concept of restorative justice demonstrates how a traditional method, contradictory to the penal code, finally led to a more peaceful conflict resolution. Attempts to resolve disputes in court often result in more, rather than less, violence (Canuday 2004). The traditional method in contrast seeks for a settlement mainly through compensation and the idea of “healing the wounds”. It sees the crime that an individual commits as being embedded into a particular social context, as well as being part

22 In the case of Nalapaan, this was the outbreak of 2000; in the case of the other communities that joined the space for peace later on, this was after the 2003 escalations.

of a longer chain of events. A restorative court case thereby becomes a portrait of society and its resolution a community event of reconciliation. This system is still strongly elite based, especially among Muslims, but intra-group participation was enhanced to include women and youth, who now claim to have their own expertise.

Even bigger changes in social practices can be seen in the way elections are conducted in Nalapaan. Conflict analyses have shown that on a community level, as much as on regional and local level, elections are a key escalating factor of conflict (Kreuzer 2007). Therefore Nalapaan changed the election process by moving away from the constitutional process of competitive elections and by then moving instead towards the traditional approach of appointment with the approval of all involved. This approach cannot be described as democratic in the Western sense, but it has reduced the violence and tensions between the groups that were typically heightened during election times. Local elections have become a “consultative” process (Benitez 2008). The members of the community council collect names and platforms of all those who wish to run for office. These platforms are put in the community hall for public display. After some time the council members visit all families to ask which of the candidates they would vote for. In a community council meeting they then choose which candidate should run for office and ask all the others to withdraw their applications. For the final “election” (formally conducted as envisaged by the constitution), only one of the candidates runs; the council members are elected in the usual way, on the very day of election (as a concession to the national constitution). So far this process has been astonishingly consensual, producing one Muslim and one Christian leader in a predominantly Muslim area, without any violent escalations.

3 Impact: From Local to National?

The impact of such a local approach is hard to evaluate and can only be talked about hypothetically. In Nalapaan, central issues to the national process were left aside: The topic of land distribution was never profoundly targeted as it was not one of the major causes of conflict in Nalapaan. Marginalization of Muslims in terms of economical opportunities and political power was minimized, but only within the premises of Nalapaan, not extending to regional and national levels. On this local level, all issues newly evolving within the community were dealt with in a rather pragmatic and non-violent manner, leaving the battleground to the rebels and soldiers. This decision for non-violent approaches, especially, has had a major impact on Nalapaan. Compared to surrounding communities, people live in relative

peace and have achieved slow, but steady, development. A redistribution of power and an empowerment at the local level of governing strengthened problem-solving mechanisms and enhanced the capacity of decision-makers to fully exhaust the power provided to them by the constitution,²³ and in some points even go beyond it. Due to NGO support, all groups within Nalapaan have had their peace dividend, and their overall situation has steadily improved as projects are no longer destroyed by cyclical outbreaks of violence. The multi-ethnic network provides access to all sides of the conflict, an opportunity which government agencies and international bilateral development agencies generally do not have (Bücker 2007: 108).

This brings us to two questions: (1) Why was such change possible in Nalapaan? And (2), what does this mean for the protracted situation on the national level, described in the earlier part of the paper?

The first question can be answered by referring to a classical approach in conflict-resolution theory: Zartman's theory of ripeness. A conflict is ripe for resolution if both parties (a) perceive themselves in a hurting stalemate, (b) perceive the possibility of a negotiated solution (a way out), and (c) if a strong leadership is present that can deliver the parties' compliance with the agreement (Zartman 2000: 228-235).

The analysis of the situation on the national level has clearly shown that there is a stalemate in the case of Mindanao, but it is not perceived as hurting by all parties involved. The national government has other issues ranking higher on its agenda; local politicians in many cases even directly benefit from the war. As the case of the MoA-AD has shown, neither of the two sides can so far ensure full compliance with the agreement, and especially the leadership on the government side does not seem to be strong enough to control internal opposition. Concerning "ripeness" of the conflict on the national level, it can be said that the only condition met (and even *whether* the condition has been met is debatable) is the one referring to the possibility of a negotiated solution (Kreuzer 2010: 8).

The great advantage of local approaches is that they do not rely on the accord of warlords, national army officials, or rebel leaders, but on the power and will of local stakeholders. They do not have to find an answer to elites' struggle for power, resources, and weapons, but only for the people who wish to rebuild their lives in peace. This makes the situation in Nalapaan different from the situation on the national level. All citizens, even the

23 Such as, for example, full ownership over NGO cooperation and project implementation (Republic of the Philippines 1991. *Local Government Code of the Philippines*: Sec. 36), or the establishment and operation of peoples' and non-governmental organizations to become active partners in the pursuit of local autonomy (Republic of the Philippines 1991. *Local Government Code of the Philippines*: Sec. 34).

local and religious leaders, perceived the situation as a very hurting stalemate. Leadership on the local level is stronger than it is on the national level. It is much more bound to the traditional ties of kinship and settlement, and the group to be coordinated and mobilized is far smaller than on higher political levels. Local spoilers are often strongly integrated into their family structures, not allowing them to openly speak or act against this consensus. The involvement of local NGOs and the possibility of negotiating with local MILF and army commanders in 2000 opened the door to the third condition for ripeness: a negotiated solution as a way out of this stalemate, even if limited geographically and in terms of time. Such a geographically limited end to the violence was achievable because it did not affect the conflicting parties' national strategies given the limited extension, purpose, and duration of the concept (Hancock and Iyer 2007: 46). Additionally, the local military leaders did not want to appear to be acting against the wishes or interests of the very people whom they were pledging to defend and liberate (Avruch and Jose 2007: 65). The ripeness on the local level, obviously, was and is different from that on the national level. This leads us back to the second question: What impact could those local approaches have on the national level?

(2) It has been rightfully argued, that “until now, peace research has not shown a systematic, causal relationship between the micro-level work on attitudinal change and corresponding changes in the macro-environment” (Kreuzer 2010: 11). And even the case of Nalapaan shows that micro-level changes in attitudes and behaviour have little direct impact on the national level. High-level actors obviously have much to lose in a peace deal, as the strong reaction to the MoA-AD has shown. They might subscribe to a logic of interest and power-bargaining much more than do those within Nalapaan, who are mostly victims of the war and have little to lose during peacetime. Therefore, the approaches taken in Nalapaan cannot simply be replicated nationwide. They might not bring the violent conflict between the MILF and the Filipino state to an end, but their potential is on other levels:

(a) In times of war, they can provide a blueprint for both sides, where peace agreements could provide alternative (non-violent) approaches to deal with the conflict, delegitimizing those pushing for violent solutions. So far, civil society has not managed to cut the guardian knot (Kreuzer 2010), but what they lack most are integrative and realistic (as opposed to utopian) alternatives to a violent solution (Kreuzer 2010: 9-16). Such alternatives can be provided when looking closer at how communities such as Nalapaan re-frame their identity concept and re-shape their practices of decision-making. The experience of such communities can provide vital and realistic concepts for cooperation that are not derived from any ideology or international

agenda, but rather from within the very communities they have to work in afterwards. This has, to some extent, already been shown in the negotiation of the MoA-AD, where integral parts such as the two-level justice system or the consultative election process, had been included in the peace panel discussions and the final draft (GRP and MILF 2008).

(b) In the phase between the peace agreement and its corresponding implementation, peace organizations can inform and mobilize the local population to support this process. A central problem of this process is translating the national agreement, concentrating on power- and resource-bargaining, to the local level of mistrust and prejudice without losing its peaceful intentions. Political elites negotiating such deals might think along rationales of bargaining, negotiations, incentives, and gains. But the long history of war, fought along ethnic and religious lines, has introduced “being a Muslim” or “being a Christian” as very vital separating factors in the daily lives of most Mindanaoans. Forty years of mobilization along religious lines and the massive escalations have done a lot to deepen prejudices. A peace deal on the national level, negotiating a redistribution of resources and a re-ordering of autonomous regions, does little to change that. The ordinary inhabitant of Mindanao (not a member of the peace zone) still *acts* according to his own narrative and his own understanding of the situation, which, in most cases, is still framed by exclusive identity concepts and a familial political system. Approaches such as the one taken in Nalapaan can provide solutions to the problem of how to bridge this gap between national agreements, focusing on power and resources and their local implementation, taking into account identity-construction and collective processes.

(c) In the implementation phase, they can further provide working examples of local cooperation and support implementing agencies to replicate such region-wide. Institutions, working with these examples of best practices²⁴ are currently gaining ground on government and MILF sides, and even the local leaders of Nalapaan are giving speeches in surrounding communities on their positive experiences.

As opposed to national peace talks and development plans (focusing on economic and political issues), the biggest achievement of Nalapaan is on the psycho-social level – reframing identity in an inclusive and non-violent manner and changing social practices of decision-making to a more inclusive approach. The case of Nalapaan shows how a change in these two central concepts became possible on the local level because the actual experience of the people (their narrative) was included in the re-definition and its focus was local, referring to the immediate context of individual and collective

24 Such as the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute.

sense-making. None of the national and regional pre-conditions changed significantly, nevertheless a more dialogical process of non-violent decision-making was established and an inclusive identity concept evolved, tying the formerly opposed groups together in their commitment to community development. Looking at the protracted case of the Mindanaoan conflict, it becomes obvious that solutions might have to be negotiated on the national level, but to be realistic, sustainable, and implementable, they have to be taken from the local level.

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