



Inclusive Peacebuilding in Mindanao: Why Local Faith Actors Matter

Philippines Policy Report

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Executive Summary

This policy brief builds on the findings of the research project Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order, a three-country study exploring the important role of local faith actors (LFAs) in fostering social cohesion, conflict resolution, and sustainable development in fragile contexts. All recommendations in this report are based on the Philippine research team's engagement with 33 local faith actors (LFAs) in Mindanao from September 2023 to December 2024, conducted by the Ateneo de Manila University in partnership with World Vision Development Foundation, Inc. (World Vision International in the Philippines) and Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology.

The centuries-long legacies of colonialism, marginalisation, and prolonged armed struggle between the state and separatist groups continue to shape the lives of the Mindanao people. Religious differences, while not the main driver of conflict, have also been exploited by extremist groups, heightening tensions among Muslims, Christians, and the Lumad (non-Muslim indigenous peoples). The 2014 peace agreement, which created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, is envisioned to build a more stable and just region through greater autonomy. Yet old challenges such as poverty and inequality persist, as new issues arise.

As part of Mindanao's 'robust' civil society, LFAs, notably at the highest levels, have been instrumental in forging the region's long path to peace. The research upon which this policy brief is based highlights three key insights. First, local faith actors in Mindanao (LFAs) understand peace primarily as a lived and relational experience rooted in everyday social life rather than as an abstract political settlement. Second, beyond institutional roles, their peacebuilding practices are motivated by deeply held spiritual values and moral commitments that cannot be measured or empirically observed (what we are calling 'intangible') and that sustain long-term engagement with communities. Third, LFAs draw on their locally recognised moral authority and trusted social relationships to mediate disputes, mobilise collective action, and sustain dialogue across religious differences. Our findings, therefore, highlight both the tangible and intangible contributions of LFAs to peacebuilding, particularly the ways faith-inspired motivations and community trust enable them to address conflicts that formal institutions often struggle to reach.

These findings underscore the need to involve religious leaders in peacebuilding initiatives, given the continued relevance of faith in communities. We offer the following recommendations for various stakeholders:

- National and regional government: Include LFAs in formal partnerships and mechanisms such as peace councils and local development planning.
- Donors and NGOs: Offer flexible funding mechanisms for quick response to emerging crises and community needs, and facilitate knowledge transfer between technical peacebuilding practitioners and local faith actors.
- Academia: Conduct research on faith-based practices, interreligious dialogues, and community-level mediation to generate evidence that can inform peacebuilding policy and program design.
- Multi-stakeholder platforms (peace councils, local development councils, and interfaith peacebuilding networks): Provide LFAs and other grassroots actors a seat at the table in conflict and post-conflict recovery forums.

LFAs' legitimacy can be leveraged in collaboration with government, civil society, academia, and multi-stakeholder platforms to ensure that peace is not just negotiated in formal processes, but lived in homes, communities, and across generations.

Background: Why Faith Matters in Peacebuilding

Mindanao remains one of Southeast Asia's most conflict-affected regions. Scholars have often described the Mindanao conflict as protracted – tracing back to the Spanish colonial era – and rooted in deeply-harbored mistrust among peoples of various faiths, ethnicities, and groups (Rüland et al. 2019). Mindanao historian Rudy Rodil (2022) argues that the region's history has been shaped by powerful social forces, particularly colonialism, which transformed its social and political landscape. The arrival of Islam from the 13th century, introduced through trade, marked the first major influence. This was followed by Spanish colonialism from the mid 16th century, which brought the sword and Christianity, and fueled tensions between Muslims and Christians during the Spanish–Moro wars (1565–1898). Later, American imperial rule (1898–1946), introduced modern warfare, democracy, public education, the English language, and expanded trade and commerce. During the American colonial period, large-scale resettlement policies brought Christian settlers from Luzon in the north of the country to “civilise” the so-called natives of Mindanao (Abaya-Ulindang 2022). The island's rich natural resources also attracted American and, later on, Filipino elite business interests, which displaced both Mindanao's Moro¹ and non-Moro indigenous (now known as Lumad) population (Alamon 2017). For sociologist Arnold Alamon (2017: 112), this “systemic appropriation of land and resources” is at the “root of the conflict” in Mindanao. These migration patterns and resettlement efforts contributed, often unintentionally, to enduring divisions and recurring issues of peace and order in the region.

The legacies of colonialism, marginalisation, and prolonged armed struggle between the state and separatist groups continue to shape Mindanao people's lives. Despite the signing of peace agreements and the establishment of a new autonomous region (the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or BARMM), communities still face persistent challenges, including poverty and threats from extremist groups (Mendoza et al. 2021). Civil society and grassroots organisations have maintained a strong presence, leading diverse peacebuilding initiatives across sectors and localities (Trajano 2020). Rood (2005) describes the peace movement in Mindanao as “active,” reflecting both the broader strength of Philippine civil society and the sustained efforts to address Mindanao's conflicts over the years.

As religion remains one dimension of this conflict, local faith actors (LFAs)² have played a central role in these peacebuilding efforts. Among the key peacebuilding activities they engage in are interfaith dialogue, peace education, combating violent extremism, and safeguarding community peace (Dagle and Cornelio 2025). The role of high-level multi-stakeholder platforms, such as the former Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), has been

¹ Muslim ethnolinguistic groups of Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and Palawan in the southern Philippines.

² LFA is a term increasingly used in research and practice to refer to informal and grassroots faith actors closely linked to local faith communities, including places of worship and their congregations or memberships, as contrasted with national or international faith actors who have greater reach and are more likely to be engaged by humanitarian actors than their local counterparts.

well-documented (Rüland et al. 2019). However, the BUC has faced sustainability challenges until recently, when it was reconstituted as the Mindanao Religious Leaders Conference, or MiRLeC (Office of the Presidential Adviser for Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity 2024). This underscores the need to involve grassroots religious leaders in peacebuilding efforts to complement and inform high-level platforms such as MiRLeC. LFAs should be considered crucial peace actors as Mindanao continues to transition to a post-conflict setting, facing both old and new challenges.



Local faith actors take part in a Do No Harm workshop in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines.

Key Findings from the Philippines Study

This policy brief builds on the findings of the research project Building Community Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation as a Response to Global (Dis)Order, a three-country study exploring the important role of local faith actors (LFAs) in fostering social cohesion, conflict resolution, and sustainable development in fragile contexts. All recommendations in this report are based on the Philippine research team's engagement with 33 local faith actors (LFAs) in Mindanao from September 2023 to December 2024, conducted by the Ateneo de Manila University in partnership with World Vision Development Foundation, Inc. (World Vision International in the Philippines) and Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology.

The Philippine team engaged 33 LFAs from diverse faiths, regions, and areas of specialisation. All of them are based in, or have worked in, various parts of Mindanao.

Three key findings emerged from the study. First, **peace as articulated by our participants is a lived experience**. These definitions of peace offer fresh insights from usual notions linked to violence and conflict, and which deeply resonate with the diverse experiences of grassroots communities where religious leaders remain respected:

Peace begins at 'home'

The LFAs describe peace as rooted in the family and domestic spaces. For example, Christian pastors describe promoting peace by instilling biblical values of respect, obedience, and love for one another within the household. Similarly, Muslim LFAs emphasise Islamic teachings on compassion, mutual respect, and responsibility within the family. They believe these values of building harmony at home prevent conflict and reduce crime. Examples include mediating family disputes, guiding children to honour parents, and facilitating agreements on financial support for elders. In both traditions, nurturing respectful and caring family relationships is seen as the foundation for building peaceful communities.

However, some peace practitioners caution that the family is also a site of conflict and aggression. They raise the critical question of whose notion of "home" is being invoked when peace is equated with family life.

Harmony between and among religions and traditions

LFAs facilitate dialogue across Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous traditions to maintain peace and harmony among their diverse communities. Their efforts challenge stereotypes and build mutual respect. They also navigate tensions within their own faith communities to maintain unity in peace work. An important strategy they deploy is forming interreligious and intrareligious organisations, which serve as platforms for dialogue and cooperation.

Holistic view of peace

LFAs also draw on faith concepts such as shalom and jihad to describe peace as holistic, involving personal, spiritual, economic, and social transformation. Their work spans food security, education, and psychosocial healing. This view of peace highlights a key insight from our LFAs that peace flows from the inner self to the community and society.

Safe spaces and inclusion

Some LFAs and organisations like ILAW Shared Community³ in Iligan demonstrate how faith can provide the foundation for inclusive safe spaces, especially for youth and LGBTQI+ groups. These spaces enable honest conversations on sensitive issues such as gender, sexuality, and reproductive health.

Security (personal, political, and economic)

LFAs define peace as connected to fundamental gut issues of safety and security, political freedoms, and economic progress. They step in where state support is lacking, such as mediating clan disputes (rido) and assisting displaced families. Because they are rooted in the communities they serve, they can respond quickly to crises.

Second, peacebuilding is motivated by our religious leaders' faith and values. Their work seeks to address gaps in governance and social services and is grounded in the “intangible” dimensions of religion, such as belief in a more-than-human power, a sense of calling or transcendent purpose, and dispositions of awe, empathy, and compassion.⁴

Third, LFAs draw on forms of authority such as moral credibility, spiritual leadership, and community trust, to influence peacebuilding efforts and mediate local disputes in their respective communities. This authority is generated and sustained through religion's tangible expressions of the earlier-mentioned intangible dimensions of religion including ritual (including prayer), existential questions, authority of religious leaders, peacebuilding actions of religious leaders, moral guidance, authority of sacred texts and teachings, belief in the afterlife, not harming others, charitable work/service, and place to worship/congregate.⁵ This underscores the need for secular authorities and external non-governmental organisations to recognise and work closely with religious leaders in communities.

³ILAW Shared Community is a local non-government organisation based in Iligan advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

⁴<https://hiddenpeacebuilders.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/137/2025/11/Faith-Informed-Peacebuilding-v3.pdf>

⁵Ibid

Policy Implications and Recommendations

LFAs in Mindanao occupy a unique space and position in local communities. Overlooking their roles leaves significant gaps in peacebuilding strategies. They hold deep community trust, combine spiritual and material support, and address both immediate needs and deeper wounds caused by conflict. When excluded from policy frameworks, peacebuilding initiatives risk being perceived as externally driven and disconnected from community realities.

Integrating LFAs into peace and development frameworks can strengthen social cohesion. Their presence in local communities enables them to address everyday grievances, mediate family disputes, and provide spiritual care that promotes healing. Integrating their roles into formal peace and development plans ensures that interventions address structural drivers of conflict, such as poverty, land disputes, and displacements. They also address the social and spiritual wounds left by decades of conflict and violence.

Their faith-based approaches also naturally bridge the nexus of humanitarian action, development work, and peacebuilding. These approaches allow the LFAs to operate across relief, recovery, and reconciliation in ways that formal institutions often find difficult to replicate.

These insights point to clear policy directions for government, donors, NGOs, academia, and multi-stakeholder platforms:

For governments at both the national and BARMM levels, formal partnerships with LFAs should be institutionalised by including them in peace councils and local development planning. This ensures that local realities inform policy decisions and strengthens the bridge between the state and citizens. The government should also invest in training for LFAs in mediation and conflict sensitivity to further build their capacity in navigating the complex dynamics of conflict in Mindanao. Recognising both the spiritual and material contributions of LFAs in policy frameworks aligns recovery efforts with how communities themselves define peace and wellbeing.

For Donors and NGOs, supporting LFAs requires flexible funding mechanisms that allow quick response to emerging crises and community needs while sustaining local peacebuilding initiatives. Strengthening interfaith platforms focusing on youth and gender will help build trust across religious divides and include voices (youth, children, women, and smaller faith communities) often excluded from formal peace processes. Facilitating knowledge exchange between LFAs and formal peace practitioners can bridge technical expertise and local perspectives and improve the coordination and sustainability of peace interventions. For academia, documenting and analysing faith-based practices can generate empirical evidence that shapes policy and the design of peacebuilding programmes. Universities can collaborate with LFAs to deliver tailored training (ranging from mediation to participatory planning) and provide neutral spaces for interfaith and intergenerational dialogue.

In this sense, LFAs, government leaders, women, and youth can jointly reflect on challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding.

For multi-stakeholder platforms such as peace councils, local development councils, and interfaith peacebuilding networks, inclusivity needs to go beyond symbolic representation. Providing LFAs and other grassroots actors a seat at the table in conflict and post-conflict recovery forums can build a shared ownership of peacebuilding agenda. Including youth in these platforms creates space for them to raise issues that matter to them (including sexual and reproductive and health rights) alongside adults, parents, LFAs, and government leaders. Such intergenerational conversations can help ensure peace efforts remain relevant and sustainable.

Conclusion

LFAs are already on the frontline of peace in Mindanao. They mediate conflicts, assist with relief and rehabilitation, nurture dialogue, and guide local communities through the long process of healing. Their deep community roots, moral authority, and interfaith networks position them to address both immediate needs and long-term reconciliation. Recognising their role is not simply a matter of acknowledgement. It is a practical necessity for building a lasting peace. Investing in LFAs' capacities will strengthen their work in communities. Their voices need to be part of shaping policy. Embedding them in formal peace and development processes will create a more inclusive, grounded, and sustainable framework for peace and strengthen existing efforts.

In a region where trust in institutions can be fragile, LFAs bring legitimacy that no other actor can easily replicate. Strengthening collaboration between LFAs, government, civil society, academia, and multi-stakeholder platforms is both an urgent and achievable step. Doing so will help build a future where peace is not just negotiated in formal processes, but lived in homes, communities, and across generations.

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