

Women, Peace, and Budget Advocacy

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The road to peace is a road.

It might sound too literal but this is one of my conclusions in a study that asked upland community women what peace means to them.

No, it need not be like the 10-lane circumferential road that Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Governor and ex-MNLF chief Nur Misuari had built for Jolo. The road the women had in mind was a basic two-lane concrete that would traverse the length of the three barangays in the interior of Kalinga (in Northern Luzon) where the Guilayon people live. Certainly, not the current rundown gravel road strip to the town center of Tabuk on one end and the narrow footpaths that linked the three barangays to each other.

So why is such a road so central to the peace of the women of Guilayon? In this place, the women traditionally did the marketing. On horseback and during good weather, the women could bring down only about 200 pieces of banana fruits to sell at the market in Tabuk. The effort and the time spent were not worth the little income they could get from the few goods. So the bananas are just fed to the pigs.

With a road, more goods could be brought down with less effort. Their incomes would increase and their basic needs met. Domestic life would be more blissful because couples would have less reason to quarrel.

With a road, their children won't have to walk through mud on rainy days to get to school. It would be faster to bring down their sick for emergency medical care. As it were, the sick are carried on bamboo poles. With a road, even fetching water would be easier.

Truly, with a road, life would generally be more peaceful.

Ironically, they had opposed the building of a road before. Guilayon was a hotspot in the war against the communist insurgents in the late

1980s and early 1990s. The people there had seen bombs drop on their yards where their pigs were kept. The community was highly militarized, divided in loyalty between the state and the rebel forces.

The social fabric was in shreds. Some women had been stung by "the love that came in uniform," marrying soldiers and paramilitary troops assigned to the place. Others – cousins, siblings, neighbors — supported or joined the rebels.

At the height of the conflict, the community folk thought a road would only facilitate the movement of government troops, exposing them to more terror. And so they opposed the plan to build the road.

When the conflict simmered down, they began thinking about the road again. What it would do to improve their mobility, once curtailed by curfew rules during the conflict. How it would mean so much to their wellbeing. How it could bring "everyday" peace to them.

When we went there in 1993, they were lobbying for the road. But the money wasn't there anymore. The road was still in the plan, but like so many other government projects, its construction was subject to the availability of funding.

I have not been able to go back to Guilayon so I am not sure if the Guilayon women now have their road. I don't know if the violence in their midst has dissipated, or has actually come back; if the wounds in the community have healed and they have now began stitching back the torn shreds of community life. But I know their stories are similar to so many other rural areas. One does not have to go very far away from Metro Manila to meet so many other women with similar simple notions of what peace means. But because of the continuing cycle of poverty, conflict and government failure, peace continues to elude them.

We went to Guilayon as part of a study looking at how grassroots women could be mobilized in the peace process.¹ We saw the peace process operating at different levels – the national and the local. Women's participation can be promoted at these levels in different ways

and means. In fact, it is there on the ground where the corps of peacebuilders could be found. The negotiating tables in Metro Manila or some other foreign capital – where admittedly only few women are seated – make up just one strand of our quest for peace.

Part of the output of the study was a framework that will locate the niche of community women in the national peace process. Below I reproduce this framework in the hope of spinning off more programs for intervention using the framework as starting point:

"The resolution of conflicts involving the state and the opposition against the state necessarily entails solutions at the national or state level. The commitment of these national actors to a peace process is essential for any negotiated settlement to take place. Moreover since such conflicts can generally be traced to structural inequities, only major structural transformation could comprehensively address the conflicts.

The peace process is thus termed 'national' because it involves actors who represent groups and forces with a nationwide character. These actors include the two parties in direct conflict – namely, the Philippine government and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front, and third parties known collectively as the 'peace constituency.'²

The peace process is also national because it aims to address the major concerns besetting the nation and seeks reforms that would spur social transformation.

But while national politics becomes the focal arena for this national peace process, local communities are also centers in themselves with their own set of actors and action-reaction processes.

In fact, it is in the local communities where structural violence is directly manifested and where, therefore, community residents have a direct stake in the resolution of the conflict.

Local communities in themselves, however, cannot eradicate the roots of structural violence since the latter involves national actors and national-level politics.

However, local communities can undertake local peace processes geared at lowering the level of political violence in their community. A lowered level of violence will allow for other modes of political and non-military intervention, make conditions more favorable for organizing work for popular empowerment, foster political and cultural pluralism, and enable community members to plot out and initiate socio-cultural economic development projects.

In effect, local communities, especially those that have gone through actual war situations, can start to reconstruct their socio-economic and political lives even as the national-level resolution of conflict has yet to be achieved.

Local reconstruction of families and communities need not wait for the nationally negotiated political settlement of the armed conflict. Admittedly, such efforts would necessarily be limited by the structural constraints. The absence of violence could in fact be tenuous in the light of the constant threat of eruption of armed confrontations.

However by building strong peace constituencies at the grassroots, local communities can evolve into moral and political forces able to negotiate their own interests vis-a-vis the armed groups. By rebuilding and enhancing their socio-economic lives, they can meet their basic needs and become more active peace movers.

In so doing, local processes could in fact enhance the national peace process. 'National' becomes, in effect, the sum total of all such local peace processes. But it is also more than the mere sum of its parts. As the national-level process progresses, it also enhances the progress of peace building at the grassroots.

Local peace processes can thus be viewed as strategically linked to the national-level process for peace and social transformation."

And what would the role of women be in the local process? This is what our study had to say:

"Women can be valuable actors in the local peace process. As wives, widows, mothers and young women who are direct or indirect victims of

violence, women can transform their negative experiences into positive action designed to end violence and build new societies.

Without the realization that they can act now from where they are, many grassroots women feel they do not have the time, resources and skill to engage in national-level politics. However, the realization that peace and development progress together and the process begins with and proceeds from their homes and communities can effectively empower women to work for peace.⁷

I always look back fondly to the field work in Guilayon for what it had taught me about women's lives in conflict situations. But allow me now to go fast forward to my more recent exposure to efforts of women to retake control of their lives, this time in the area of budget advocacy.

A recent workshop organized by the Asia Foundation presented the findings of case studies on how the local governments have allocated the mandated minimum 5 percent of their budget to gender and development (GAD) projects. The GAD fund has become one focal point for engaging the government on matters relating to the government budget. This area of engagement is now called "budget advocacy" and the GAD fund provides one distinct gender dimension to this advocacy. We are reproducing in this issue the overview on these cases.

Budget advocacy is a new terrain for our women and civil society groups. The TWSC's 1997 studies on state-civil society engagement have already seen it as an underdeveloped yet important arena for engagement. Every year, budgetary allocations are decided and even more often, budget expenditures are made — whether from the mandated 5 percent for GAD or the rest of the 95 percent for everything else.

It is quite important that women start questioning where the funds are going, and have a say on where they should go in the first place. The Guilayon women can argue, for instance, how important the road construction is to their lives, pressure their local government to source out and allocate the funds, and make sure the funds are spent wisely so that a good solid road for them can be built.

Surely, there is a close *link* between peace advocacy as reflected in the story about the road, or women's quest for everyday peace, and women's initiatives in budget advocacy. The groups doing work on budget advocacy may not know it, but this new terrain of engagement has a *direct* bearing on our old, unfinished quest for community and national peace. ❁

Endnotes

- 1 The study, simply titled "Project Group on Women and Peace" was begun in 1993 under the auspices of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women. The members of the Team were Lorna Z. Sagobia, Pi Villanueva Reyes, Neneth Lachica, Malou Saguitan, Teresta Quintos-Delos, Sr. Helen Graham, Risa Montveros Baracust, Beinda Calaguas, and myself as Project Team leader. The project ended in 1994 and the study has been reproduced in pamphlet form by the NCRPW.
- 2 Since our case studies were concerned with these parties, we therefore do not include the other armed opposition groups here.