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Narratives of Community Resilience from Two Villages in North Cotabato

Abstract. This study uses narrative psychology and interpretative phenomenological techniques to privilege the subjective meaning locals make in the stories they tell of human-initiated disasters that visited their communities in the last decade. Results yielded the articulation of social imaginaries, community trauma events, and elements of community resilience in the anticipatory processes, coping, protection and functional adjustments, and adaptive learning carried in these narratives. The impact of community disaster is examined in terms of re-organization of thought, social relationships, and community processes that enhance the villagers' ability to anticipate, withstand, and ward off future such adversities. Findings indicate the need to highlight the importance of reflective and dialogic processes to promote social cohesion and external support to these villages to improve disaster risk reduction, mitigation, and recovery from future such disturbances.

Narratives of Community Resilience from Two Villages in North Cotabato

Introduction

There often is no way to talk about community resilience without bringing up the community trauma that caused the former to emerge. Transforming trauma into resilience necessitates for the trauma story to be consciously incorporated in the psychohistory of those who experienced it (DLSU, 2011). For this, narrative forms pioneered by White and Epston (1990) find application for trauma recovery, especially in the low income, basic services deprived communities where oral tradition remains to be the norm (Fuertes, 2012).

The recent shift towards resilience studies has generated an array of conceptual models and action strategies to help communities prepare for, ward against, cope with, withstand, and recover from disasters (Harrison, 2012). This seeming fad in academic and policy research, however, is not without criticism. Almedom (2011) noted that at both the local and global levels, resilience realities are contested, with questions on how they are framed and by whom. On one hand, there is pressure from the international humanitarian imperative to protect public health and human security even across continents. On the other hand, the rights-based imperatives of autonomy and self-determination assert for the consideration of local context when grassroots communities organize to mitigate the impact of adverse events.

When disasters do happen, they impact at the level of the community and no two communities are likely experience the same event in exactly the same way. Thus Longstaff et al. (2010) concurred that community resilience assessment ought to be at the local level. Local emergency planning and response activities ought to be guided

by an assessment of resource robustness and adaptive capacity of the five interrelated community subsystems - ecology, economy, physical infrastructure, civil society, and governance. Their resilience assessment framework incorporates both preventive/protective processes and response/recovery processes, departing from earlier conceptions of resilience that mainly emphasized resistance processes such as risk reduction and other anticipatory strategies for disaster preparedness.

Community resource robustness may be assessed for performance, redundancy, and diversity of assets that the community members could command. On the other hand, adaptive capacity connotes active learning, flexibility, and openness to novel solutions in times of crisis (Paton & Johnston, 2006, p. 8). Adaptive learning requires that people transform how they imagine their community and its people, to include how they believe interactions within should proceed (Staratt, 1996).

A community, by traditional definition, is a geographical space within which people meet their needs in interaction with others. Yet, interactions are influenced by the social imaginaries people hold (Taylor, 2004). Social imaginaries are internalized social cognitions that influence who are allowed to interact with whom. They are carried and propagated in images and narratives – stories, gossip, even myths - that people tell about how they relate with each other. So in times of crisis when the supply routes could be disrupted, social imaginaries offer a key to examine the social processes for the distribution and allocation of available resources among community members.

Staratt prescribed that people in crisis should be willing to find new ways to work together with what they have to meet present realities and to innovate as new realities unfold. Milstein and Henry (2008), on the other hand, underlined the importance of the readiness of people to initiate connection and positive relations, transcend differences, and actively bring out differing voices to diversify ideas to be considered in shaping the collective responses.

In examining social change towards stability, Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) emphasized watching out for new interactions that emerge at the boundary points between social groups, arguing that these points are where the system is most vulnerable to positive change. New relationships form new connections, and new connections make possible the emergence of new, more adaptive behaviors.

The foregoing suggests that the concept of community resilience requires the bitter experience of a potentially traumatizing event such that people come to actively develop anticipatory processes, functional coping and adjustments, and adaptive learning to be applied to future such adversities. In addition, it prescribes that resilience studies ought to focus on the local level and also tells where to look, what to examine, and how to do it. Almedom (2011), however, cautioned against falling into the trap of dignifying normative value judgments just as Harrison (2012) warned researchers that resilience studies may overly emphasize the ability of communities to withstand adversity or, worse, be used to justify prescriptions that shift responsibility for addressing the crisis towards the survivors and away from the duty bearers.

Indeed, there may have been studies that unabashedly highlighted, for example, the ability of war refugees to actively engage efforts for their own healing and rebuilding (Canuday, 2010; Fuertes, 2004), and yet this does not negate the need for more resilient studies to be done especially in the Mindanao communities that are yet to be free of disturbance-driven challenges. The more their particular context is understood, the more able would stakeholders be in crafting support mechanisms to enhance the capacities of these communities to overcome similar adversity in the future.

Human-initiated Community Disasters in North Cotabato

Violent clashes from clan wars, interethnic strife, colonial conquest and resistance, pacification campaigns, and secessionist assertion are facts in the history of the southern Philippines. Today, many pockets in the region still experience sporadic outbreaks of deadly encounters between combatants of various persuasions and contending interests. North Cotabato in mainland Mindanao is among those that continue to have relatively high security concerns.

North Cotabato is under the area of responsibility (AOR) of the Philippine Army's 602nd Infantry Brigade. A recent security brief given by the Intelligence Officer of the brigade¹ indicated that ground troops here recognize three threat sources: the Southern Philippines Secessionist Groups (SPSGs) that include the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)² and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF),³ rido⁴ or clan wars, and armed lawless groups (ALGs) that include the New Peoples Army (NPA),⁵ the armed component of the National Democratic Front (NDF).

Loose firearms abound in areas where police presence is weak and warlordism has remained to be the *de facto* political authority (Santos, Santos, Dinampo, Paredes, & Quilop, 2010). Some political patrons back their power with a formidable arsenal; in other areas, civilians have taken to arming themselves – sometimes with the assistance of the state⁶ - to deter or defend against armed threat (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2008).

In recent years, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to armed conflict between government forces and the MILF peaked three times: in 2000 during the all-out war; in 2003 during the Buliok campaign; and in the 2008-2009 pursuit operations against three MILF commanders who had staged violent attacks on civilian targets (Rodil, R., Rodil, S., Gloria, & Andrada, 2010). The 600,000 people displaced in 2008 hostilities accounted for close to 13 percent of the 4.6 million newly displaced people all over the world that year (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2009, p.14).

Often, reports from the southern Philippines highlight psychic trauma and distress happening in the region. Scant attention has been paid, however, to the grassroots efforts at recovery and human agency - both at the level of the individual and the community - in areas affected by conflict and calamity. The experience of communities in crisis is often defined in documents produced by concerned government agencies and international humanitarian groups to justify the release of emergency funds and relief supplies for their support. The picture these documents paint is a picture of victimization that, while not intended, stifles the voice of survivors valiantly struggling to overcome.

Much has been learned about resilience realities on the global front, and yet such may not adequately capture the peculiar nuances of resilient realities in Mindanao enough to inform the crafting of more appropriate risk reduction policies and post-disaster recovery plans. The burden of this paper then is to examine the resilience realities of communities in Mindanao to pick up on the ignored and underreported efforts of people themselves to take control of their lives, pick themselves up from the devastation, and support each other to ensure their speedy recovery and enduring security. Such could hopefully inform the development of policy changes and initiatives to strengthen and complement these homegrown endeavors.

Objectives

Through narratives, this paper explored the experiences of two villages in North Cotabato for insights into their understanding of the particular constellation of challenges they respectively confronted and the unique responses they evolved to address these. Specifically, these narratives picked up on how the participants defined themselves and their communities and their responses to prevent, protect against, recover from, and adapt to threats and challenges they confronted.

Limitations

The two villages were selected based on public record of at least three armed conflict episodes in the decade. Representatives from these villages were identified based on their willingness to travel to Davao City to take part in a two-day workshop. The participants vary in age, gender, ethnicity, education, profession, family circumstance, and extent of community involvement.

The narratives they shared during the workshops are not intended to be the definitive story of their community's crisis experience, but are rather views influenced by the person of the narrators, their direct experiences of these events, and their observations of community life. In reading these versions of oral history, it is important to recognize that the social construction of collective reality is a dynamic process; subjective memory is heavily laden with meaning, such that some items of historical fact may be edited out because these had less significance for the narrator while those of more emotional impact may be placed at the foreground. Also, on hindsight, some life experiences could be revealed in a new light. Thus the community story could differ on nuance and focus, depending on who does the telling when. Still and for all that, articulating a public accounting of the collective narrative is a crucial step in helping people recover from the experience of tragic events.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design through the use of small group workshops and plenary discussions to draw narratives of community resilience. Through narrative and interpretative phenomenological techniques, a context-specific examination of the respective experiences of these communities before, during, and after critical incidents of human-initiated disasters was attempted.

These narratives were constructed by six representatives from the villages of Nalapaan in Pikit and Pagangan in Aleosan. More on-site interviews with village officials, public school teachers, and youth and women leaders in both villages as well as in nearby Dualing were conducted a week after the workshop in Davao City.

Locale. The two contiguous North Cotabato villages subject of this paper sit at opposite sides of the border that separates the town of Aleosan from the municipality of Pikit.

Founded in 1937 when it was yet a Manobo settlement, Barangay Pagangan in Aleosan covers 1,067 hectares of rolling hills and plains. Since then, the heavy influx of Maguindanao Muslims and Ilongo settlers from the towns of Alimodian, Leon, and San Miguel led to land disputes that turned violent in the 1970s. Residents fled the area every time the fighting between the Muslim Blackshirts and the Ilongo Ilaga escalated.

Uneasy peace came to Pagangan in 1976 when MNLF leader Hadji Salik Nawal surrendered to the government. Portions of the hilly barangay, however, remain to be an active transit area for armed secessionist groups, especially with the ideological split between the MNLF and the MILF in the early 1980s. Pagangan was affected by the breakdown in on again-off again peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF in 2000, 2003, and 2008.

Identified as a resident community of former MNLF combatants, Pagangan was among the recipients of the multidonor development package⁷ under the terms of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA). The peace and order situation, however, remains of concern, as the transit of rogue MILF elements required the mounting of heavy military operations several times in the years after the 1996 FPA, the most recent having been in August 2008 when armed men loyal to MILF commander Ustadz Amiril Umra Kato⁸ were flushed out of the Tubac complex.

As of 2007, there were 607 households in the barangay,⁹ earning an average of PhP3,066 per month, mostly from farming activities. Microfinance access, however, remains limited.

Nalapaan, on the other hand, became a barangay only in 1960. At present, there are about 270 farming families of diverse ethnic descent similar to Pagangan's - Manobos, Maguindanaons, and Ilongos. Mean monthly family income is pegged at P4,000.

Sitting three kilometers south of Pagangan, Nalapaan also saw fierce fighting between the Ilagas and the Blackshirts in the 1970s. Today, however, it is recognized as the first barangay to be declared a *Space for Peace* on the strength of a peace covenant drawn up by the residents with the government, the MNLF and the MILF in 2001. Later, the *Space for Peace* would expand to six more Pikit barangays which, together with Nalapaan, came to be known as G7 or GINAPALADTAKA.¹⁰

On 2-3 August 2011, a workshop consisting of small group discussions and individual interviews drew narratives on community experiences of terror-evoking events and how the participants remember their communities to have responded to these. A week later, these villages were visited for validation of the narratives.

Audio recording of the community narratives from the workshop was transcribed. Meaning-based translation was done where necessary, with conscious effort to preserve the thought structure and normal conversational cadence of the original transcript.

Data analysis drew on the techniques of narrative psychology to characterize the narrator and sequence his story from beginning to the end. The narratives were coded for excerpts referring to details that fell into the following conceptual categories: social imaginaries; community trauma experience; and community resilience as detailed in their disclosure of anticipatory processes, coping, protection, and functional adjustments during crisis, and adaptive learning. In discussing the findings, there was an active attempt to surface the subjective meaning narrators gave to their lived experiences.

More than focusing on the objective details of events as they unfold in the lives of people,¹¹ narrative and phenomenological techniques privilege the voices of the narrators to be heard on how they subjectively experienced these events (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Quite possibly, some errors in the respondents' recall might be due to the selective filter that edits human memory, subject as it is to distortions associated with the phenomenon of temporal dilation or contraction. While such errors were attempted to be minimized through the use of small groups whose members could correct each other's recall during the workshops, it is nevertheless still possible for collective myth to feature in the final output. Whenever possible, crucial details turned up in the narratives were triangulated against

community records, related literature, and interviews with village residents, journalists, and military sources.

Narratives of Community Resilience

The narratives that emerged from the workshop vary in depth and degree of detail. The Pagangan story was presented by an active woman leader in her late forties while the Nalapaan story was told by the 66-year-old barangay captain.

Contextualizing Community Resilience. This section is intended to situate the reader as closely as possible to the perspective of the narrators as they recounted their experience and tell about their responses to community adversity. Their narratives are examined for the social imaginaries they hold; community trauma experienced; and community resilience elements of anticipatory processes, coping, protection, and functional adjustments, and adaptive learning. To clarify, transcripts from the on-site interviews were also used.

Social Imaginaries. The respondents described their villages as “tripeople,” a local term that refers to populations consisting of Muslims, Lumads (indigenous peoples), and Christian settlers. Despite the ethnic divides, they observed that neighbors seemed to get along well and shared the aspiration for peace and security. According to the Pagangan villager:

Among ourselves we are peaceful... Among us tripeople in Aleosan, we come to each other’s aid... We feel for each other in times when the (peace) negotiations are ongoing. It is only when the peace talks breaks down, when the negotiators disagree at the table and contending demands are not acceptable, that we experience strife.

The Nalapaan village chief echoed:

The residents in Nalapaan are tripeople – Muslim, Christian, Lumad. Before, we loved each other. We were happy living together, but because of what happened, we could not avoid the trouble that came with the all out war.

The 2000 all-out war deepened the interethnic schism in these villages, unraveling the fragile social bonds and setting neighbors to be wary of each other while the security situation remained fluid. Evidently, interethnic relations in Nalapaan improved after, but interviews in the

Aleosan villages of Dualing and Pagangan confirmed that even in 2008, displaced residents split again seemingly along ethnic divides, with the settler families heading to the town center in Aleosan and Muslim residents moving to join relatives in evacuation centers in Pikit.¹²

When disaster struck, these communities did not have emergency provisions and found themselves largely dependent on external support from higher government units and relief organizations. The 2000 war, in particular, impacted as a humanitarian crisis such that the Nalapaan village chief remembers the residents to have been reduced to foraging for food:

We would go back to our barangay, but we didn't stay... only during the day. We foraged for wood, for food provisions we had left behind, fruits... then, back to the evacuation center.

In an interview with the Pagangan village chief, he too alluded to the strain on family resources that the hasty evacuation in 2000 brought upon some of his constituents:

How could they go back to normal when they did not have their carabao any more - it was sold there at the evacuation center so they could eat.

Repeated war experiences disrupt economic activities, especially in Pagangan that is perceived to be blessed with prime agricultural resources. The woman leader recounted:

Aleosan in North Cotabato is productive... very productive in terms of rice and corn, and we also grow high value crops here... Based on my experience, we plant coconuts and bananas hoping that after five years it would sustain the children's needs for school... But when wars come, our farms get burned down to the ground... We have to start all over again.

Nature's bounty has not been evenly distributed in the village, however. Elsewhere in her narrative, she referred to population pressures today wreaking havoc on their habitat:

And then recently, we also experienced flooding because some portions of the hills were turned into swidden farms. The people in the uplands have no other source of livelihood but to convert the hills into swidden farms.

To varying degrees and at different times, civil society efforts at post-disaster relief and rehabilitation have been directed at these villages in the form of emergency relief, infrastructure provision, livelihood projects, and value formation initiatives for human rights education,

gender empowerment, and literacy. The communities are indicated to vary in their readiness and capability to harness external support and to sustain these community stabilizing processes at the termination of these projects. Culled from the Nalapaan narrative are the details to some of the external support in response to its disaster experience:

...there was more relief coming for the war-affected residents. So the barangay officials worked with the NGOs – we submitted the names of those who evacuated. We assisted the NGOs in the distribution of relief supplies. Even the youth... they really helped a lot...After the 2008 war, the ACT for Peace Programme¹³... coursed funds through the LGU. The amount was to be divided for infrastructure, feeding program for the children, and then health services.

Surprisingly perhaps is the view the residents hold that combatants too want peace and would be ready to talk peace and recognize instrumentalities that ensure it. According to the Nalapaan village chief,

We talk to whoever is in command, the highest in command. We tell them we don't want violence. They share that principle. The MILF is for peace. Our soldiers are also for peace.

The Pagangan villager confirmed the public commitment made by combatants to the peace covenant signed in Nalapaan in 2001:

...an accord with the civilians was signed there with (former Defense Secretary) Angelo Reyes and (former MILF chairperson) Hashim Salamat that Nalapaan will be spared from war. Combatants should not come in to fight. Umra Kato should not enter. Even he recognizes the accord.

Community Trauma Experience. The harrowing events described in the narratives ranged from sporadic outbreaks of armed hostilities, incursions by armed MILF bands, and government offensives against MILF enclaves. In Pagangan, the entry of MILF groups evoked the need to flee:

It seems like every three years, fighting comes to our community – 2000, 2004, 2008 – combatants battled it out in our community...when wars come, our farms get burned down to the ground because this is where the MILF troops would hide, so the military would have to flush them out... When the military comes in with their 105 (Howitzers), violence is sure to happen in our place.

In Nalapaan, the story was of terrifying conflagration, the entry of battle-ready government troops, and the bombing runs. The narrative mentioned the following details of successive war episodes:

There was an encounter, and that was the time that the people started to pull out. They evacuated. Many houses were burning... When the MILF came down, and when the soldiers went out of their camps, they did not give us warning. We did not know. The next thing we knew, they were firing at each other already... We weren't being attacked but the planes that did the bombing, instead of dropping the bombs in Pagangan, their bombs fell in Nalapaan.

Violence escalated in Pangangan because Kato was holing out in the marsh at its periphery. Nalapaan was a transit area for the government troops that were sent to neutralize Kato and his forces. While Pagangan was the major arena of battle, some of the violence spilled southward over to Nalapaan.

Anticipatory Processes. Nalapaan residents had been caught unprepared and did not have much time to evacuate before the fighting got to the village in 2000 and 2004 and when bombs started to drop on their houses and farms in 2008. Over in Pagangan three kilometers away, the villagers received information on the incursion of Kato's forces through various sources – text messages from sitio leaders, reported sightings, government bulletins, and communication sent by Kato himself through emissaries:

...the people would know when fighting was about to happen... because Umra Kato would send emissaries. And then there were intelligence reports.

Thus, even before the military planes were sent in, residents had already started to evacuate to safety. In fact, in Barangay Dualing north of Pagangan, village chief Novie Sillote reported that the first of Kato's forces were frustrated not to find anybody home in the villages they passed through,¹⁴ the residents having fled already to the covered court fronting the village hall as early as a month before the 2nd Scout Ranger Battalion moved into the Tubac complex.¹⁵

The villagers assume a cyclical pattern to the fighting between the soldiers and the MILF, reckoning that violence comes to visit every three years. The woman leader from Pagangan referred to assistance that villagers get for roofing materials in the wake of war episodes:

Among ourselves, we joke that our roof looks old, that it needs replacement. That, maybe it's about that time for war to happen again.

In early August 2011, three years after the 2008 pursuit operations, they were anticipating that the uneasy peace talks would soon hit a snag.¹⁶ They pinned their hopes on the outcome of the peace talks and tuned in

to media reports for indicators of when renewed hostilities might ensue. Pagangan barangay captain Guanzon said,

We look to our political leaders. When we hear them uttering hot words on TV, on the radio, we anticipate that the peace talks would collapse. Automatic... We will be dragged into the conflict that would ensue. We saw that in 1997, 2000, 2003 when peace talks bogged down. We would surely bear the brunt... So long as they're talking, we're still good. I tell my constituents that while the two sides are still sitting down and deliberating, we should use the time to keep on planting. We hope they will keep talking, no matter how long it takes. We don't mind if it's going to take a long time so long as they are still communicating. It's when they stop that we will have a problem.

Coping, Protection, and Functional Adjustments to Crisis. After the devastation wrought by the 2000 all out war, local leaders in Nalapaan sought representation with the MILF and the Defense Department for the signing of a peace covenant. According to the Nalapaan village chief:

Fr. Bert Layson of the ICP (Immaculate Conception Parish), came to us barangay officials and urged us to talk to the community for the people to make a declaration... It was February 1, 2001 when our declaration got the stamp of approval from Hashim Salamat and the AFP Chief of Staff Angelo Reyes. Immediately, when that declaration was approved, many people started to go home. That was when they came to believe that there will be no more fighting in our community.

In the years after, this pact had been largely honored by the combatants such that no active violent engagements among contending troops have been recorded in the area apart from that brief armed encounter in 2004. Evidently, Nalapaan villagers had high hopes that the *Space for Peace* accord would be honored. This sense of optimism held even months after the war got to neighboring Pagangan and the prospect of it spilling over to neighboring Nalapaan became a reality:

Until 2004... there was armed conflict, but it did not last long. And not like earlier when many houses were destroyed. No, we did not know that there was to be an armed encounter. They were there... and the other force came also... We evacuated fast.

This complacent belief in the protection afforded by the peace declaration was again manifested in 2008:

In 2008, that trouble with Umra Kato... well, we were right next to Pagangan. Soldiers bombed Pagangan, but it was Nalapaan that got hit. That shouldn't

have happened. We were a *Space for Peace*. There was an agreement. It was Hashim Salamat himself who approved that declaration – not Umra Kato. Hashim Salamat himself.

In both places, the immediate response of the community residents to the impending armed clashes was to get out of harm's way. In 2008, Aleosan evacuees trooped to the covered court or to the temporary tents set up by village officials. Emergency relief was almost immediately provided by various sources, coursed through the barangay government. Guanzon narrated that,

We were able to care for the first wave of evacuees. We put up a tent over by the solar dryer. Then, the second wave. But on the third wave... It was difficult because the people went their separate ways¹⁷ and the barangay had very limited resources. It was hard (after that) tracing those who went to Pikit to live with their relatives. It was a good thing there were NGOs who helped so some form of aid was extended to the evacuees.

However, as the situation deteriorated over the weeks and tension remained high in anticipation of more armed conflict, many villagers moved to evacuation centers set up outside of their barangays. The few who remained within relocated their homes to what was perceived to be safer ground. Guanzon explained that,

The hard times lasted nine months. On the tenth month, they started to come back. But normalization took about five months or more. Christians were traumatized... especially in Sitio Tubac. While we were able to assist those who had their houses burned, their belongings destroyed, it was a long time before they could overcome their fear.

When the wayward bombs in 2008 forced Nalapaan residents out of their homes, they spent the nights in the public school building and left in the morning so that classes could resume. This went on for some weeks as fighting raged in the Tubac complex some ten kilometers further past the mountains and into the marsh. The Nalapaan village chief explained how this happened:

We do not have an evacuation center here, so I designated the schoolyard. So for three days that there were bombing runs, we were there.

Community volunteers observed that government response to the needs of the IDPs suffered delay. For the first three days, it was a problem accessing emergency relief assistance. They often confronted the unwillingness of government officials to get out of their offices and obtain

for themselves the accurate picture on the ground such that documents could be prepared to release emergency rations. Speaking on conditions of anonymity, a youth leader in Nalapaan shared that,

I had served as a barangay youth leader and I became critical of the unserved needs in our village. The barangay captain called me personally and asked me to go out and assess who were affected. He could not trust his own councilors because they would just list down the names of their relatives, even those who were not affected.

This earlier lethargic and self-interested response of local leaders to deliver relief to affected residents also featured in the Pagangan narrative:

Before, there was only one person who received (emergency rations) for the community. Like, a one-man rule. There was a problem then with relief not getting to some people.

Village chiefs in Pagangan, Nalapaan, and nearby Dualing, on the other hand, said that they immediately coordinated efforts to protect and care for the affected villagers in 2003 and 2008. However, they also admitted that protracted displacement indeed strained village resources. Despite that, village governance appeared to have been functional in ably coordinating assessment of needs and distribution of externally sourced relief in the first few days.

Assistance provided by government agencies, civil society groups, and relief organizations also aided in the post-disaster rehabilitation of these villages. Roofing materials were provided for the repair of damaged homes. Livestock and seedling dispersals were also undertaken to help the farmers start over. Three years after the last war episode, an on-site visit showed that the bomb craters on the farms had been plowed over and were again being used for planting.

Projects to give people access to livelihood and basic services also featured in the post-disaster recovery processes. Artesian pumps have been installed in Nalapaan in areas where potable water remains to be a problem, especially as there had been realignment of the residential zones, with villagers rendered homeless by the war opting to build their dwellings closer to the road. Village halls have been refurbished with toilets and wider covered areas that could serve as temporary shelters.

Local social formations had also been organized in these affected barangays, all holding the potential to be turned into a disaster response

network when needed. The villages have formulated disaster risk reduction and mitigation plans to reduce the adverse impact of future similar events.

Adaptive learning. When describing the people in their respective villages, the respondents remarked on the ethnic divides, but claimed that under normal conditions, they had harmonious relations and shared the aspiration for communal peace. In explaining the armed conflict episodes that happened in their home communities, the participants privileged an external attribution to the cause of the conflict. They think of these events as human-initiated, such that similar events in the future could actually be prevented by the decision and political will of people outside of their villages. The Pagangan villager opined that,

Among ourselves we are peaceful, but when a third party comes in - like the MILF that conduct incursion into our place - it turns bad for us... When the military comes in with their 105 (Howitzers), violence is sure to happen in our place. Without the big guns, there won't be any violence.

Inspired by Fr. Layson, on the other hand, the Pikit villages negotiated with the combatants to carve a *Space for Peace*. Such daring could only come with the re-organization of thought that allowed them to accept that combatants would be receptive to the cessation of hostilities. Getting the weapon wielders to commit had not been easy. As the Nalapaan village chief noted,

...the other barangays saw that we had not suffered so much because we were a *Space for Peace*. That was how GINAPALADTAKA was formed. Because they saw that we had declared a Space for Peace, they followed suit. They also formulated... and declared a *Space for Peace*. It's a long process. Of course, you had to seek representation with the highest body... you can't just... with the Central Committee. The barangay captains went to see them.

Perhaps it was because the Pikit villages were more predominantly Muslim that Salamat and the MILF Central Committee proved receptive to signing the peace covenant. Over in Aleosan where Christian settlers farm what Kato and his breakaway band contest to be Moro ancestral domain, Pagangan could not even seem to hope to carve out a similar agreement. Also, the MILF Central Committee seems to have tenuous control over Kato who, by habit, has been known to hole up at the Tubac complex every now and then, inviting the military might of the government to flush him out.¹⁸

Note, however, that the repeated armed conflict experiences in Aleosan had resulted in the establishment of community processes for disaster response, particularly on organizing for evacuation, speeding up relief distribution, and keeping the displaced together where aid could get to them. As disclosed in the Pagangan narrative:

In years past, when violence came to Aleosan, we scattered. We went our separate ways. But in recent years, we have become more aware of the need to stay together. We have assigned persons and committees that people can go to in cases of emergency. Then, we also have disaster awareness, and an awareness of the applicable laws. We have identified relays in the distribution of relief.

For Nalapaan, on the other hand, that had no infrastructures to house emergency evacuees, the present leadership insists that,

Today, if it happens again, the Muslims and the Christians go together. I know them all so they listen to me. My principle is to put the people together, so when help comes, they're all there. It's no trouble to put Muslims and Christians in one evacuation center.

Discussion of Findings

Fundamental to trauma recovery is the need for the trauma story to be consciously incorporated in the psychohistory of those who experienced it (DLSU, 2011). Narrative forms are increasingly recognized as a tool in understanding the peculiar experience of trauma events, and storytelling is prescribed for use particularly in communities where oral tradition is observed to be the norm (Fuertes, 2012). Thus, the drawing of these narratives on the human-initiated disaster experiences of these villages borrowed from techniques in trauma work that sought to structure the stories from beginning to end for coherence, contextualizing the telling in the identity of the narrators and their personal accounting of the events. The narratives highlight the reorganization in thought, social relations, and community processes as the villagers grappled with violence happening in their community and sought to recover from its adverse impact in their lives.

Priming the narrations was the articulation of the social imaginaries that villagers held, detailing how they described their people and the nature of the interactions among them. Findings yielded that while ethnic diversity was marked as matter of fact, the narratives also brought out the conditions under which the social rift could widen and interethnic

harmony could break down. Overall, it was indicated that cooperation for new behaviors that could hasten the return of stability could be negotiated among the residents themselves. In 2008, for example, the Nalapaan village chief's appeal for evacuees – both Muslims and Christian – to stay together in the village was heeded, whereas in the earlier armed conflict episodes, they had gone off to the evacuation center in the main district of Pikit.

Despite the fact that these villages sit right next to each other, they varied in terms of resource robustness, and thus varied also in their resilience capacities. And while they had access to the same network of external support, there were marked differences in the way each experienced the three armed conflict episodes. Pagangan was more often and harder hit because of the preference of Kato to hide out there. This significantly increased this village's vulnerability to the occurrence of more intense firefights.

The narratives allowed the examination of aspects of the ecology, economy, physical infrastructure, civil society, and governance of these communities. Findings yielded that while residents relied heavily on farming, Pagangan had relatively richer agricultural resources than Nalapaan, owing largely to a water source that Nalapaan lacked. Income indicators in both villages suggested that residents could not afford extended interruption of their livelihood activities, such as could be a consequence of protracted armed conflict episodes.

While the villages had designated evacuation centers in times of war, these were inadequately equipped. In Pagangan, it was just a hastily erected tent, while in Nalapaan, it was the school building. The decision to utilize these community infrastructures for temporary shelter demonstrated flexibility and the will to make do with what there was. However, it also meant that community services for which these infrastructures were intended had to be disrupted.

Almost upon their influx into these evacuation centers in 2000, 2003, and 2008, the IDPs became heavily dependent on external support for relief. Even as local governance scrambled to meet their needs, the reality was that emergency rations at their disposal were limited. Community members pulled in to help distribute emergency care packages provided by NGOs and humanitarian groups. Distribution relays appeared to be more functional in Pagangan, with specific people and committees tasked

with the responsibility to cover certain areas. In Nalapaan, relief volunteers consisted mostly of younger residents, with distribution centralized at the schoolyard.

The narratives revealed evidence of active learning that seemed to mitigate the adverse impact of war experiences from one armed conflict episode to the next. Openness to entertain and attempt novel solutions in response to the disturbance-driven challenges characterizes the adaptive capacity of a community (Paton & Johnston, 2006). As an illustration, Pagangan villagers learned after the 2000 all-out war that by reworking social imaginaries they held of themselves – from mere recipients of to more active volunteers in relief distribution, they could establish a more orderly relay system, thereby significantly improving the ability of the community to care for its affected residents in the subsequent war episodes. This emerging community process was made possible by a restructuring of social relations among residents.

Nalapaan, for its part, learned that negotiating for a peace covenant with the combatants could prevent the scale of devastation that the community experienced in 2000. When an armed encounter happened in the area in 2004, the villagers were quick to call on combatants to honor the terms of the covenant, thus preventing more collateral damage.

The audacity to negotiate with combatants could only have been the result of a re-organization in thought that allowed village leaders to conceive that a peace pact could even be a possibility. It implicated a transformation in the way they viewed themselves – from helpless bystanders who had to ignominiously scramble to get out of the line of hostile crossfire to self-determined stakeholders who had the right to demand that outsiders take their war somewhere else. This transformation in the way the villagers viewed themselves bore the seed of emerging adaptive behaviors to confront their dire circumstances.

This new behavior emerged from interactions initiated by the Pikit parish priest with the village leaders in the evacuation centers. At a time of crisis, Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) opined that new interactions occurring at boundary points between social groups – in this case, between the Catholic peace advocates led by Layson and the predominantly Muslim village chiefs - could result to novel solutions that could improve conditions. Evidently, the idea surfaced and gained

persuasion because people were ready to transcend religious differences and consider new ways to shape their collective response.

Implications and Recommendations

This paper sought to contextualize the resilience realities of grassroots communities and surface how community trauma experiences impacted changes in thought, social relations, and community processes. The narratives told by village residents dealt with three armed conflict episodes in 2000, 2003-2004, and 2008. Both communities suffered almost total devastation in 2000, but had more marked differences in their experience of the last two war episodes. The difference appeared to be influenced by the execution of a community-initiated peace accord in one and the presence of a military target in the other.

It is apparent from the community narratives that the repeated war experiences of these villages necessitated the emergence of improvements in local preventive/protective processes and response/recovery processes. However, there remains the need to support homegrown efforts to further enhance resilience in these villages and improve local disaster risk reduction, mitigation, and recovery plans.

While these two villages sat right next to each other, they did not have the same experience of these events. Armed conflict brought equal suffering among the tripeople residents and yet in one village, the displaced chose to stay together. On the other side, armed hostilities set off fear and suspicion along ethnic divides, making it hard for Muslims and settler families to remain together in the evacuation center. Continued efforts at enculturating peace through intercultural dialogue, especially among the youth who have yet to develop generational memories of bitter ethnic strife, should be pursued.

Communication relays, especially in the later years when text messaging came to be a norm even in the most remote parts of the country, served as early warning of impending threat to Pagangan. Today, leaders follow news reports on the progress of the GRP-MILF peace talks, in the belief that war episodes in the community come in the wake of the breakdown in the peace negotiations. Nalapaan, on the other hand, did not see the need to anticipate threat and therefore did not develop early warning procedures. Because the threat of armed conflicts still hovers,¹⁹ there is the need for Nalapaan to adopt early warning, early response mechanisms to avoid civilian casualties.

When armed violence escalated, both villages were characterized by scarcity of emergency resources and infrastructure. Coping in times of displacement was aided by the patchwork efforts of a multitude of sources that, even taken together, were inadequate to mitigate the social cost of forced displacement. Local infrastructures intended for other purposes were commandeered to serve as temporary shelter for the evacuees.

Adjustments were made to accommodate temporary needs, as shown in the evacuees' use of the Pagangan school building only at night to avoid suspension of classes. In both villages, however, displacement overwhelmed village officials with the need to liaise for external support while at the same time mustering community volunteers to care for those affected. Village leaders took the lead in working out a return to stability. Political will was shown by the Nalapaan barangay officials in seeking representation and successfully negotiating for the village to be spared from armed encounters. This novel idea was borne by an uncommon interaction intended to generate a collective response to the disturbance-driven challenges confronting the community.

The community processes that were evolved to ease hardships necessitated social restructuring. In both villages, the notion that the displaced should to stay together during future evacuations has been internalized. Pagangan organized committees tasked to serve the needs of future evacuees. Planning for disaster risk and recovery management had also been tabled with the hope of smoothly articulating local plans with the procedures established by the municipal and provincial LGUs.

Apparently, there too is the need for relief providers to network and coordinate responsibility for emergency provisions to avoid duplication of materials. Duty bearers, in particular, should find ways to overcome inertia in response to community crisis by hastening the inventory of affected residents and thereby improve the timing of delivery of emergency relief. Response plans should take note of the functional community-based relay system and use this for more orderly support to families in crisis.

Of remarkable note also is the fact that Nalapaan's *Space for Peace* covenant has since been replicated in six other villages. This indicates that communities similarly challenged by the persistent threat of armed conflict may be inspired to replicate the reflective and dialogic processes

that gave birth to this novel response to bring about safety, security, and stability to community life. Little control over outsider belligerence implies very real limits to the exercise of agency of disturbance-challenged communities. Still, Pagangan can learn from Nalapaan's example at making representations with combatants to respect the peaceful aspirations of its residents.

Finally, the use of storytelling as a tool to contextualize community trauma and resilience has indeed been modestly successful in meeting the objectives of this study. However, it also brings to focus the relevance of recently articulated criticism that studies such as this primarily have to accept the normative value judgments (Almedom, 2011). Storytelling lends to the narrator the position of the protagonist and, depending on how strongly he feels about presenting himself in a good light, the story he tells could overly emphasize the community's ability to withstand adversity and gloss over hardships as they had been actually experienced (Harrison, 2012). The details provided in community stories ought to be validated from more objective sources when intended for use in policy making.

The relative merit of community narratives lies in their articulation of the elements to collective experience that the people themselves have invested with meaning. For a more relevant and sustainable engagement, therefore, these are the elements that stakeholders and supporters should take into account when planning to aid the villages for emergency planning and disaster preparation. These are, after all, the elements that make sense to the people themselves.

The employment of narrative psychology and phenomenological analysis on community trauma in Mindanao is an uncommon research application in a field long dominated by political scientists, security analysts, human rights activists, historians, humanitarian groups, and gender and peace advocates who view war experience through their own specialized theoretical orientations. In the interest of opening up the discourse on the subject, it is encouraged that the very same data set used in this study be subjected to a multi-disciplinary analysis.

Notes

¹ On 28 May 2013, the 602nd IBDE gave this writer the courtesy of a security briefing on the authorization of the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for Operations, Armed Forces of the Philippines.

- ² The hard-line MILF breakaway groups are present in the Davao region, Zamboanga Peninsula, Sulu, Basilan, Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Sarangani and Lanao provinces.
- ³ The MNLF forged a peace pact with the government in September 1996. However, in many parts of North Cotabato, MNLF enclaves are still armed and ready to defend their territory against encroachment.
- ⁴ Ridos are protracted feuds over land ownership, personal grudges, and contending political interests made more volatile by the proliferation of loose firearms in these communities. Because of overlapping clan connections, political interests, and ideological affiliations, a rido outbreak has the potential to spill over its violence to neighboring communities and, when not contained or managed properly, could drag the MILF, the MNLF, the Local Chief Executives (LCEs), and the AFP units into the fray.
- ⁵ State security forces accuse the NPA of carrying out extortion and banditry in many parts of Mindanao, notably in the Caraga and Davao regions and the neighboring provinces of Compostela Valley and Sarangani. In North Cotabato, there have presence in the eastern half of the province.
- ⁶ In the week after the 18 August 2008 MILF attacks in the Lanao del Norte towns of Kauswagan and Kolambugan which resulted in the killing of 30 civilians and tension over the incursion of MILF troops in some towns in North Cotabato, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) authorized the distribution of 13,000 shotguns to community volunteer organizations (CVOs) in Lanao and North Cotabato (www.humanrights.asia/news/forwarded-news/AHRC-FST-055-2008.)
- ⁷ The delivered projects include a barangay health station, a cattle dispersal project, and postharvest facilities.
- ⁸ Recently disowned by the MILF as a breakaway group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) led by hard-liner Kato has been restive since its founding in 2010 (Bordadora, 2011), figuring in several violent clashes over disputed land in Datu Piang, Maguindanao and North Cotabato.
- ⁹ Pagangan barangay captain Gregorio Guanzon (Interviewed by Gail Ilagan, 8 August 2011, Pagangan barangay hall) puts the number of household at 678.
- ¹⁰ The acronym stands for seven Pikit barangays: Ginatilan, Nalapaan, Panicupan, Ladtingan, Dalengaoen, Takepan, and Kalakakan.
- ¹¹ In mental health practice, it is important to extract the subject's story of his traumatic experience, as this provides the crucial indicators of the extent of

his psychological recovery and healing. The narrative also shows the gaps that psychosocial support efforts need to address.

- ¹² Interview with Pagangan barangay captain Gregorio Guanzon and Dualing barangay captain Novie Sillote, 8 August 2011.
- ¹³ The United Nations Action for Community Transformation for Peace Programme was the successor program for the UN Multi-Donor Programme that administered the funds pledged by foreign governments in support of the 1996 FPA between the government and the MNLF.
- ¹⁴ Kato's forces reportedly burned over 50 houses in Tubac, but it was only months after the fighting that the community was able to verify exactly how many.
- ¹⁵ For a detailed account of the 2008 pursuit operations in the North Cotabato area, see Quita et al. (2009).
- ¹⁶ Two months later, in October 2012, there would be a renewed call for all-out war against the MILF over the death of 19 soldiers in Basilan. The peace talks held.
- ¹⁷ The residents of Tubac and neighboring sitios started evacuating as early as 1 July 2008. In an earlier interview with Guanzon on 15 August 2008, he told this writer that it was on 18 July 2008 that the Muslim evacuees left the barangay evacuation center for Pikit, while the Christian evacuees moved out to San Mateo in Aleosan Proper. The break was triggered by the 12 July 2008 fatal attack on a Christian family that was preparing their rice field for planting. Three years later, Guanzon explains that the killing of the Calasara matriarch had strained the fragile social connection between the Muslim and Christian IDPs – the Christians felt anger while the Muslims feared wanton retaliation. The emptying of the barangay's makeshift evacuation center prevented any violence that may have resulted from unchecked emotions.
- ¹⁸ Kato resigned his command of the MILF's 105 Base Command in 2009 and formed the breakaway Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). As a precondition for the resumption of the peace talks with the government, the MILF adopted a resolution in September 2011 to drop Kato for insubordination (Sarmiento, 2011).
- ¹⁹ Since the conclusion of this research project, these border villages would be visited by two more human-initiated disasters. In August 2012, BIFF forces that were flushed out of Maguindanao by military troops tried to establish more permanent presence in the area. In August 2013, BIFF forces attacked

the government detachment in Tubac and occupied the sitio, again inviting the 602nd IBDE to mount operations to drive them out. Both times, the villagers evacuated to safety with no civilian casualty.

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