

Workshop Report: Securing the transformation

Post-agreement engagement with (former) non-state armed groups

Wednesday, 11 November 2015, 11:00-14:00

Berghof Foundation, Altensteinstr. 48a, 14195 Berlin

1. Background and objective of the workshop

Starting and maintaining dialogue with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) is essential to find political solutions to violent conflict. Local, national and international actors are increasingly interested in understanding their roles and possible contribution in engaging in and supporting peace negotiations involving NSAGs. All too often however, successfully completed negotiation processes fail to translate into meaningful political reform processes. The peace dividend does not materialise. Even worse, many political settlements collapse within the first few years after a peace agreement. In addition, so-called ‘post-conflict’ violence in the social or family realm is another serious problem that affects marginalised constituencies (such as women) disproportionately.

Against this background the Berghof Foundation hosted and facilitated a roundtable meeting on the topic of inclusive peace implementation on 11 November 2015. The event, co-organised with the catholic relief organisation MISEREOR, brought together participants from different stakeholder groups in Mindanao (Philippines) – the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and civil society organisations from the Philippines and Cambodia, in addition to Berghof and MISEREOR staff members and external experts.

The first session dealt with options for an inclusive implementation design and particularly focused on security-related transitions (referred to as ‘normalisation’ in the ongoing peace process in Mindanao), while the second session was concerned with the role of external actors in monitoring and assisting the implementation of peace accords.

2. Options for inclusive implementation design

The first session raised various questions surrounding the phase of implementation succeeding the signing of a peace agreement: Who needs to be part of the implementation phase? How to ensure implementation won’t be blocked? For instance, how to prevent ‘spoiling behaviour’ on the side of incumbent elites blocking change or among ‘radicals’ objecting to demobilisation? What is the role of former combatants in leading transformation processes, both at the national and local community level? What roles can civil society play, for example as potential “witnesses” or “guarantors”?

Due to the current situation in the Mindanao conflict and given the interests of the participants, the discussion concentrated on the implementation of inclusive security transitions, which is commonly referred to as *normalisation* in the ongoing peace process in Mindanao. Normalisation is defined as the process through which communities affected by the decades-long armed conflict can return to a peaceful life and pursue sustainable livelihoods free from fear of violence and crime. It involves the transition of the MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) to a peaceful civilian life, which includes putting their weapons beyond use. It also involves the redress of unresolved legitimate grievances and the rehabilitation of conflict-affected areas.¹

The discussion surrounding the topic was initiated by an input of a Berghof Foundation staff member on the security dimensions of peace implementation and the important role of NSAGs in ensuring an inclusive process of restoring the state's legitimate monopoly of force. Thus, it was made clear that a peace process is not about defeating the enemy, but about transferring a militant political project into a peaceful one. The input stressed the need for a holistic and participatory approach to decommissioning and demobilisation (e.g. self-managed demilitarisation in a parallel fashion by all conflict stakeholders), reintegration (across political, security sector and socio-economic sectors) and security sector reform.

Yet, it became clear that the parties to the peace process in Mindanao have diverging understandings regarding some aspects of the normalisation process. For the newly evolving security structures, it means to avoid security vacuums by all means. Some participants highlighted the need to focus on the decommissioning of individual combatants, although it was mentioned that this process would not imply 'disarmament' in the conventional sense, as the Filipino constitution allows citizens to possess firearms. For former combatants and their families, it is also essential to put into place socio-economic programmes to provide them with livelihoods.

Others challenged such an individualistic approach to normalisation, arguing that the conflict-affected areas are characterised by strongly collective notions of community, hence the need for a whole-of-society approach to reintegration. A further challenge linked to normalisation is the existence of armed security threats other than the stakeholders of the official peace process (e.g. warlords or mining companies with heavy sub state and private security). Hence, as long as such armed groups exist and are perceived as potential threats, ex-combatants and their families might hold on to their firearms. This underlines once more the need to normalise the whole area, rather than narrowly focusing on the formal conflict stakeholders. It was also mentioned that a local civil society organisation is currently carrying out a broad consultation to come to a common public understanding of the notion of normalisation.

Additional factors contributing to the implementation of the peace accords were also discussed by the participants. Firstly, the issue of mutual trust was frequently mentioned. Stakeholders to the peace process voiced their belief that substantial trust has been established, particularly between the negotiating parties, and that it will help to move the peacebuilding process forward.

¹ <http://www.opapp.gov.ph/milf/news/frequently-asked-questions-annex-normalization>

The related issue of constituency-building was discussed, by stressing the importance of harnessing and maintaining public support for the peace process. One participant even called for an assurance that there will be no further violent breakaway movement emerging from MILF circles, in order for the peace process to be successful. However, this kind of guarantee was questioned for its feasibility. Firstly, the question was raised, in how far the government could warrant that its own associate sub-autonomous armed groups would not act individually either. It was agreed that there are limits to the parties' ability to ensure internal cohesion and compliance, which make guarantee of this sort questionable.

Addressing the root causes of the conflict was mentioned as a crucial factor in achieving a sustainable peaceful solution to the conflict. One participant summarised this in a strong statement asserting that the treatment of Moro people as third class citizens has to come to an end, and that only if these grievances are addressed will there be a realistic chance for peace to endure and for illegal armed groups in Mindanao to demobilise.

This emphasis on solving the conflict's root causes raised the issue of the government's responsibility to implement its commitments. This triggered a debate on what actually had actually been agreed upon or not. Whereas some participants referred to the respective documents signed by the Philippine Government and the MILF (e.g. the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro), others did not regard these contracts as a clear enough basis for the further steps in the peace process. However, all parties assured that the mutual ceasefire represents one of the firm commitments which have been agreed upon.

Next to trust-building between the parties, the importance of consensus-building within the government was raised. Since not all parts of the Filipino elite seem to hold a unified position on the peace process, it is will be crucial to rally the government institutions and stakeholders which were not directly involved in the peace process around the agreements and its agenda. One participant also raised the question of who owns an agreement, and who is accountable for it – e.g. if a government commits to an agreement, does the successive government also abide by it?

Lastly, one participant shared his insights from another peace process between the Filipino government and the Revolutionary Workers Party, describing the important role of civil society organisations in helping the affected areas to set up peace consultations. Whereas the official peace process is currently on hold, many villages continue to implement agreed-upon plans to pacify the affected areas. This shows the substantial need to involve several (not only the top) layers of society to achieve progress towards peace, and raised the important question of how one can transfer successful local results towards the 'upper' levels of a peace process.

3. The role of external actors in the peace implementation phase

The second thematic session asked the question what roles of external actors such as international NGOs might play to support the implementation of peace agreements. An input by the Berghof Foundation kicked off the thematic discussion by describing the various functions externals can take during post-war security transitions, by providing thematic expertise, fulfilling a watchdog role, cooperating with local organisations and providing capacity building to support NSAGs' transition process to socio-political democratic actors.

A representative from a Cambodian NGO working across the Asian continent shared some lessons learnt from Myanmar where a nation-wide ceasefire has just been signed between the government and several armed groups. One example which could be potentially interesting for the Filipino context is the support provided by international NGOs to Liaison Offices which help coordinate the communication between NSAGs and the military. This component of the Burmese ‘peace infrastructure’ has been used as a meeting point for officials to share information regarding the peace process with the public, and to reduce potential clashes.

In the case of Mindanao it was noted that although the current stage of peacebuilding has turned inwards by focusing on the domestic law-making arena, external actors had played a crucial role in supporting the peace process by bringing in legitimacy, expertise, guarantees and third party opinion, most notably through the Malaysian facilitation, the International Contact Group, and the International Monitoring Team. The latter is mandated to assess if the parties comply with their obligations (i.e. ceasefire, Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law), but representatives from various sides of the conflict divide also credited its presence for mitigating the tensions resulting from the Mamasapano deadly incident in January 2015, in which MILF combatants clashed with Filipino police forces. It was particularly noted that the monitors had done their best to include the national police in their work, and issued a constructive impartial report.

Various forms of bilateral technical assistance were also mentioned, which provide support to local entities (such as the Independent Commission on Policing, the decommissioning body or the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission), or target specific constituencies. For example some INGOs as well as the UNDP and World Bank are supporting the political transformation of MILF; offer training for women on political participation; provide leadership training to youth who wish to work in the administration; and train MILF forces on international norms.

On a more general note, a participant pointed out that the role of the international community should be conceived as accompaniment of local efforts, rather than the direct implementation of projects, while another stressed the need for a relationship-based approach to foreign support, alongside the use of muscled mediation and leverage.

4. Wrap up and conclusions

During the last part of the roundtable, participants summarised their key takeaways from the event. Hence, the role of constituency-building, the need for integrating security reform into a broader reform effort addressing the structural causes of the conflict, the issue of continued trust building after the signing of an agreement, and the need for a whole-of-society discussion about why arms and violence are present in communities were highlighted. Additional insights which had been raised but not discussed into detail were reiterated, such as the challenge of translating local successes of security transitions to the national level (and vice versa), the importance of peace education, the need for civil society oversight over security sector reform, and the need to understand the peace process as taking place through a series of transitions – as opposed to conceiving the peace agreement as the final solution.