

*Preparing a New Generation of Civil-Military-Police Coordination for Human Security, 9-11 December 2015
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Good morning

At the onset, I would like to say that I am speaking as a Mindanaoan and from my heart, as a woman born into the heart of the island.

I was born in Cotabato City, a city that many fear for its unstable security conditions, but for me, it is one of the safest place in the world... it is home.



But yes, I have my share of war stories to share. Our house was right along the main road, near the river called Kakar, and across that river was where the battle between government soldiers and the Moro National Liberation Front forces were waged. I remember we could not sleep on the second floor of the house because, in the evening when firing would often happen, bullets will pass through the second floor of our house. We would sleep on the floor of the big room downstairs, our sala, and there were other children from our neighbors who will be sleeping in other parts of our sala.

Our house was right along where trucks of soldiers would pass by on their way to the battle zone. One time, after a day or so when trucks passed by, one truck came back and some officers came into our house and there was chaos and my father was so tense. My sister and I looked down from the veranda and saw young men, crying, some of them just staring vacantly, one or two calling out for their Mama. They were very dirty, they were bandaged and blood showed through the white gauze. I remember thinking: What happened to them? Where are the others?

My sister and I did not talk about what we saw. We listened to my Dad who said that we were not to go out of the house without a bodyguard. We would not be allowed anymore to go to school using the school bus. We would have to be escorted to school.

Fast forward three years after graduation from college. My work in the hospital exposed me to so many ills of the country that made me embrace the desire for social and political change.

In 1986 Archbishop Philip Smith, an American, invited me to be the first lay coordinator for the Justice and Peace Ministry of the Archdiocese of Cotabato. This exposed me to so much poverty, injustice, police and military abuse as I worked with the marginalized sectors like the farmers, the labor sector, the Indigenous Peoples, and the often affected community of Dulawan or Datu Piang, another battle ground between the warring forces.

It made me experience physical pain as I sided with the laborers who went on strike to demand just wages and whose picket lines were often dismantled by police and their truncheons.

I was often trailed by intelligence assets when I worked with the Indigenous Peoples whose lands were taken over by rich families often seen as rubbing elbows with high ranking men in uniform. The assets made sure that I was aware I was being trailed.

When I participated in fact finding missions as part of my solidarity work with other Dioceses, I experienced being temporarily stopped and questioned, delaying our trip so that when we passed by the area known as “killing fields”, it was dark and yes, we were stopped by men in uniform whose name tags were ripped from their places. This is where I experienced my first negotiation under very difficult situations.

These experiences made me wary of men in uniform. I would not get near any of them, not touch them, with a ten feet pole!

While all these negative things were happening in my past, there were a number of things also happening, making me see the “other side” of men and women in uniform.

Later in my life, I experienced the military and police forces participating in Cotabato City’s first Fun Run for the Environment

As the Director of the NDU Peace Center, I experienced the military and police forces providing security during the early part of the exploratory talks between the Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, these talks being held in my office.

I met then President Fidel V Ramos, a general in the police force and I asked him why he was pushing for the government’s peace program and I can still remember his reply: “Hija, I never experienced watching my children grow up, I was always assigned in troubled areas. War is unkind to us. It’s time we work for peace so that others will have the opportunity that I did not have. “

And still, I was wary of the men and women in uniform.

Fast Track: Working with the Catholic Relief Services Peacebuilding Team

CRS started its peacebuilding program in 1997. Supporting interreligious formations, organizing and facilitating culture of peace workshops, establishing the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute in collaboration with MCC and CAFOD, establishing the Grassroots Peacebuilding Learning Course (GPLC) through the years made CRS a leading institute in peacebuilding impacting at the personal and relational levels. Cordaid was a very supportive partner way back then.

In 2005, five years after MPI was established, a challenge was posted to us at MPI. One local partner, NFI said they are working with a military colonel in their much troubled island of Basilan and they see the potential of him becoming a peace champion within the military structure. Can we provide scholarship for him?

NO WAY! That was the initial response. Then we thought about it and thought about it.

I remember the discussions we at CRS had

- If we wanted to be true to our being in the mission of peacebuilding, we will not make peace with our friends, we have to make peace with “The Other” or the “unlike minded”, and some would even refer to the military as “the enemy”...
- If we are doing all the work to increase our (CSO) capacity in peacebuilding, who will work with the machinery/institution that is programmed for war?
- If we have impacted the personal and relational level of PB among religious leaders, community leaders, and some even hardline activists who in the past accused us of softening people’s

stances so that they become lame ducks in the struggle for justice, can we somehow take the step towards trying to impact some soldiers who will eventually become the peace champions within military structure?

- If we wanted peace in Mindanao, we have to engage all sectors impacting conflict and peace, and the military and police are key stakeholders.,

The MPI management decided to take the risk. Being the more seasoned facilitator among the facilitators then, they decided to put the officer in the class I was co-facilitating. Of course I lodged my protest, in this case because the class was already full of NGOs, CSOs, activists, progressives, coming from the country and other parts of Asia but my colleagues challenged me to be a connector. I remember thinking I did not like it because I was so tired of war and soldiers, I just came back from five years of being in mission in Timor Leste, before, during and after the war. I remember praying really hard and asking my religious friends to keep me in their prayers for the whole week. Then I said I will do it for God and my country, specially my island Mindanao.

It was an experience that I would not exchange even for a million dollars. It opened my eyes, and the eyes of my co-facilitator, and the eyes of the class. From the experience of having someone come to me and say: "Why is he here? You are exposing us to the military! I am walking out of here..." the whole class became closely knit that they refused to disband even after week one. The classmates made sure that their "general" (who got his first star while doing week 1) was treated right by his other classmates in week 2. Looking back, I believe it is also the person of the general. He did not throw his weight around, he sat and was so eager to learn as his classmates. His classmates were caught flat-footed when he said that he admits the military is part of the problem in Mindanao and that is why he wants to learn how to be part of the solution in Mindanao. This was never heard of in the past.

That started the collaboration between Gen Ding Ferrer and myself and my organization/institution.

1. We provided the avenue for him to talk about his dream and peacebuilding within the military structure (GPLC Assemblies, AGONG assemblies, MPI sessions)
2. We provided support for expanding the number of peace soldiers in his division (scholarships for his senior and junior officers, supporting their re-entry plans, visiting their camps with MPI students to continue the conversation on peacebuilding)
3. We continued to accompany him and his officers if and when needed
4. We organized recall sessions just so that soldiers will have the opportunity to look at their lessons and how these lessons impacted their person, relationships and responsibilities.

What did I gain from that experience?

Personally, it made me more aware of the difficult role of being the facilitator. If in the past, I was only mentoring and accompanying activists and CSOs, this time I had to accompany also the soldiers. I had to walk the tight rope of bouncing off ideas to make them think, find options that they think might work, options that veer away from the usual response of violence and at the same time not give my own opinion, my own ideas, what I want, what I think should be.

And I have to do this even as I am working on my own trauma and biases against men and women in uniform. And I do have to admit, I am still a work in progress.

What did the CSO gain in engaging the military? A line to “call a friend” (A Filipino expression of asking for help). Let me tell you the story of Chinggay, not her real name. She was in a class with three junior officers at the MPI. In one of the days that week, she received a message that a youth activist was picked up by men in uniform, and the report said it was because the day before, he was at the forefront of a rally in their city. Chinggay was agitated and could not concentrate in class. Finally she informed me she had to leave and go home and join the search for the youth. Her classmate heard this. He volunteered to do the searching using his phone. He told Chinggay not to leave the class. That night, the young man was found not far from their office. Yes he looked dazed and traumatized. In the words of his mother “At least my son is alive!” Chinggay the very next morning hugged her classmate and thanked him. She conveyed to him the gratitude of the family of the young man. Later that day, I asked the young officer how he felt. “I feel embarrassed because I did not do that much but the gratitude is so much. I also feel ashamed because I know that our forces contributed to the suffering of the young man and his family. And I feel happy because Chinggay hugged me and she was crying and saying never in her life she thought she would do that – hug a soldier. Maam we are also human, we need those hugs.” I know of three other incidents that lives were saved, all because CSOs called their military classmates and asked for their classmate’s help.

There are challenges - one is seen as “selling out to the enemy” or being a traitor to one’s cause of human rights, justice and peace when one becomes a mentor or accompanier to the soldiers. There are sectors in our society that see the work of peace as anti-justice and working with the military perceived as machineries of violence

Personally, the challenge of working on one’s traumatic experience and always, always telling one’s self to listen and listen well, especially to someone who is not like-minded. The challenge of listening is arising from my bias against a very manipulative military / police force. I am still a work in progress and I have a long way to go...

Why am I doing what I am doing? I believe that the work to build a more peaceful country, a more peaceful Mindanao is everyone’s calling. When I asked a group of soldiers to do their diorama, they created beautiful communities made of paper, sticks, small boxes. We asked their commanding officer to be the judge, based on the criteria that the soldiers themselves came up with. After going around, the CO asked: Where are the camps? Why are soldiers not part of this peaceful community.

The class turned silent. Then one junior officer stood up and said “Sir, they are now in their homes because there is no more need for fighting. And when the need arises, they will be ready to become warriors again.”

Why am I doing what I am doing? I believe in a God of Peace. I believe that one day, “swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that hatred will turn into love and grievances into forgiveness... because justice has come.”

And there will be no more need for wars again....