

Story behind my engagement with civil society



Good morning ladies and gentlemen!

Before I talk on what collaboration or engagement I have done when I was in the active military service and now as a retired military man and what the armed forces of the Philippines have been doing on matters of engaging civil society and other stakeholders to win the peace in my country, let me first talk about where and how I started doing peacebuilding works as a military officer.

It all started in Basilan island in Mindanao in Southern Philippines, a place where you have presence of different armed groups like the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the dreaded terrorist group, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and other lawless armed groups.

I was deployed in this island way back during my lieutenant days in the early 1980s, later as a battalion commander in 1994-1997, then as brigade commander in 2004-2006 and eventually becoming a division commander that includes Basilan island as its area of responsibility.

It was during my senior command years that I was exposed to engaging stakeholders in my area of responsibility. Every time I met stakeholders during conferences, they kept asking me that “after having been assigned in the island several times and after conducting military operations for decades, what improvements have you seen in Basilan?”

I could not give any good answer, in fact I said that nothing has changed in Basilan since the last time I was there. So, people asked me, if military operations was the solution, then how come nothing has changed. There are still armed groups fighting government, there is gun culture, culture of violence, culture of silence among the people, poverty is everywhere, no social services, bad roads, schools without teachers, no public hospitals, no doctors, no medicines and so forth and people are afraid of the police and the military who are supposed to be their protectors.

I could not give any straight answer to their questions. I could only say that despite this situation, the military is needed to maintain peace and order in the province. And so, I asked the stakeholders, what then do you think is the solution to the conflict in Basilan island. They answered, "why don't you apply peacebuilding instead, it might work this time!".

Then I asked them, what is peacebuilding because it was my first time to hear that word as a military commander, and so they explained. I was surprised that the military was somehow doing activities related to peacebuilding but we were using a different approach and different language that civilians do not understand. The military language like civil-military operations is not appreciated by civilians, maybe civil-military cooperation activities would be better or medical-dental outreach program would be understood better than civic action program.

I also realized that I was engaged in a dialogue with the stakeholders, but for me it was just an informal meeting or a conference with different sectors of society. The military had similar skills in peacebuilding but we were applying it in our own way. It was more of propaganda purposes. There was no collaboration or cooperation with civil society on our efforts to attain peace and order.

Since I have an attitude of exploring and learning new things, I asked some NGO workers from Nagdilaab Foundation based in Basilan to teach me how to do peacebuilding. First thing I learned is about dialoguing, listening to people, trying to understand their concerns and most important is how they look at the military in their communities.

After hearing and understanding their concerns, I realized that there was something wrong or lacking in our approach to conflict. It was always the use of brute force. People did not really condemn the fighting and the fate of their relatives killed in encounters with the military. For them it was part of life, part of their struggle. What they felt bad about is the behavior of soldiers during operations, how soldiers treat civilians.

There were stories of abuses which even dates back in the martial years in the 1970s to early 80s. People never forgot what they experienced with the military. They felt exploited by soldiers who take away their livestock, foodstuffs, or fruits of trees without permission. For them that was more important because it is their only possessions. There was no healing process after decades of fighting in mindanao despite peace agreements with the MNLF and peace talks with the MILF.

Collaboration with civil society

So when the NGO, Nagdilaab Foundation in Basilan, recommended me to take up peacebuilding course in Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, where I met my mentor Deng Giguinto and Jon Rudy our facilitator who are also here, I freely accepted the training to learn more on how to work with civilians. From then on, I started introducing peacebuilding to my officers and soldiers.

The main problem I encountered in trying to expand peacebuilding training is funding. The military had funds only for military courses like how to operate machine gun or mortar or military tactics. I had to look for partners especially NGOs that have peace education program. I found out that there were many NGOs willing to work with me to promote peace one of which is the Christian Children's Fund or CCF also based in Basilan that supported our peace trainings for the paramilitary troops.

At first I did not really believe that we can train our troops and the paramilitary on peacebuilding because they might not understand it. But I was wrong, even the ordinary soldier has an idea of peace and can learn about peace. And so the idea of winning the peace came to my mind instead of just defeating the enemy.

Challenges of engagement with superiors and peers

It was more challenging to talk about peacebuilding to my superiors and peers because of the mindset that the core competency of the military is war fighting. My superiors even challenged us to explain how do we reconcile war fighting with peacebuilding. Many senior officers were even apprehensive that if we teach soldiers about peacebuilding, they might hesitate to fight anymore. The biggest challenge was changing mindsets and the resistance to change.

Added value to attainment of mission

For me I never lost the will to fight even after i learned to do peacebuilding. I became more discriminate in operating against armed groups. In fact, I gained additional skills and tools to analyze conflict and engage civilains which helped me and my units to win the respect of the communities where we operate. I knew we were in the right direction and so I incorporated peacebuilding modules to all the in-house trainings we conducted in Basilan.

When I was promoted to division commander, I further expanded peace trainings to all the middle-level and junior officers of my command then slowly worked on non-commissioned officers who were directly supervising military detachments in communities where we operate. Reorienting the soldiers on the ground is key to community-based peacebuilding.

When many civilians appreciated our approach to the conflict combining selective military operations with peacebuilding activities, it did not only change the mindset of the military, but it also transformed civil society who now regarded the military as a partner in building peace in communities.

Personal changes and experience

I do not want to praise ourselves because I feel it is self serving but I feel very proud of my officers and soldiers whenever I hear civilians tell stories of their good experience and relations with military personnel who have undergone peace courses.

The challenge that I see now is how do we sustain the gains and how do we achieve enduring peace in my country piece by piece. That's why even after retirement from the military, I take any opportunity to share the knowledge and experience i acquired in peacebuilding and this has become my advocacy.

And that is why I accepted the invitation of Jenny Aulin of GPPAC when I met her at UK Defense University during a seminar on conflict prevention to participate in this civil-military-police conference for human security to learn more and share our experience in peacebuilding.

I hope that in the next few days we will be able to learn from each other's experience so that we can help build peace all over the world.

Thank you and good day to all!!!