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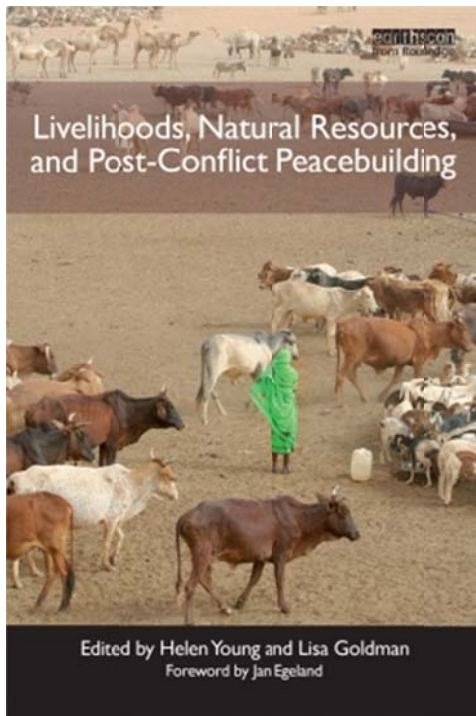
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### Improving Natural Resource Governance and Building Peace and Stability in Mindanao, Philippines

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# Improving natural resource governance and building peace and stability in Mindanao, Philippines

*Cynthia Brady, Oliver Agoncillo,  
Maria Zita Butardo-Toribio, Buenaventura Dolom,  
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*The culture of confrontation is gradually being replaced by one of dialogue and negotiation.*

—Mayor Wilfredo Asoy, Municipality of Dinas, Zamboanga del Sur, Mindanao

The island of Mindanao has long been contested territory in the Philippines, beginning with Spanish colonization 400 years ago and continuing through the recent decades of conflict between the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GPH) and various rebel groups. For the last forty years, Muslim rebels in Mindanao—the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the break-away Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)—have been waging a struggle for independence against the government.<sup>1</sup> Although the conflict between these groups and the GPH is often cast in ethnoreligious terms, in reality the unrest in Mindanao has been driven by a mix of injustice and poverty, political and clan rivalries,

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This chapter was initially drafted before the EcoGov Project ended in 2011. The chapter is based on interviews with EcoGov Project personnel, the authors' field experiences, a review of EcoGov Project technical reports and other project materials, and extensive background research about the conflict in Mindanao. The chapter was developed with support from the Center for Global Partnership of the Japan Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> Filipino Muslims, who make up only approximately 5 percent of the total population of the Philippines, are concentrated in the south, central, and western parts of Mindanao (U.S. DOS 2004).

### 342 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding

and competition for land and natural resources (Timberman 2003). The heart of the matter for many involved in the conflict has been the struggle for political and economic control over the land and resources necessary to sustain the lives and livelihoods of Mindanaosans.

Following years of negotiation, in 1996 the MNLF signed a final peace agreement with the GPH. Recognizing that an agreement alone would not bring lasting peace to Mindanao, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided development assistance in support of the newly created Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). This support included investments in natural resource management as well as other sectors. Interventions in natural resource governance were critical to stabilization in post-conflict Mindanao for many reasons—from managing clientelistic politics, to ensuring a revenue base for the new ARMM institutions, to protecting cultural traditions. At the same time, the majority of the population is directly dependent on farming and fishing for their livelihoods and food security.

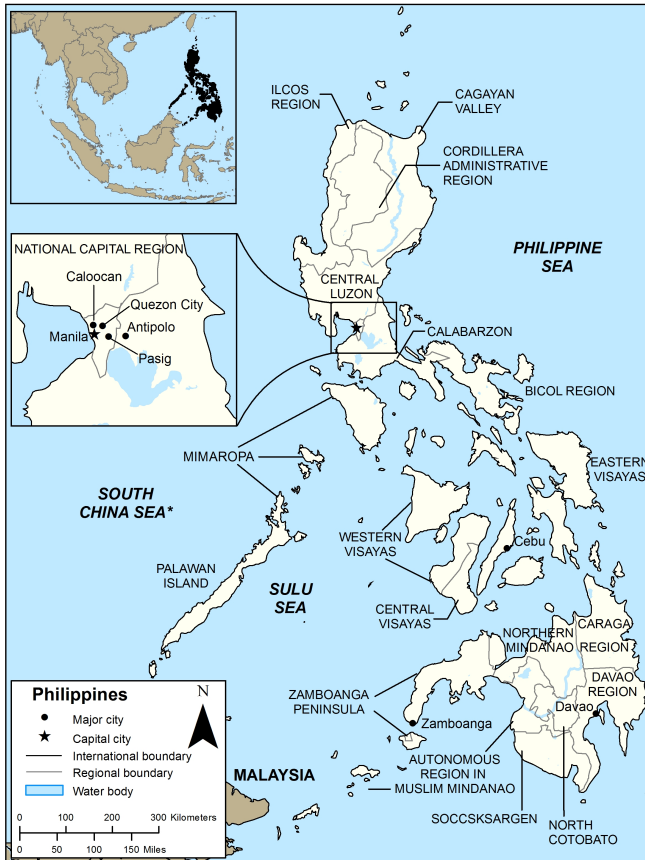
To increase understanding of the connection between natural resource management and conflict management, this chapter considers ten years of experience from the Philippine Environmental Governance (EcoGov) Project, a project funded by USAID.<sup>2</sup> The EcoGov Project has supported the efforts of local governments and communities in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao to improve the management of forest, coastal, and marine resources. Despite flaws in the 1996 peace agreement and its implementation, as well as the effects of continuing conflict between the GPH and the MILF and other armed groups present in Mindanao today, much can be learned from the experience of supporting improved governance of natural resources as a post-conflict stabilization, peacebuilding, and development tool.

This chapter begins with an explanation of the primary connections between land, natural resources, and conflict in Mindanao. It then provides some brief background on the EcoGov Project, discussing project objectives, implementation sites, and the project methodology and approach. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of two case studies from within the project: coastal resource management in Illana Bay, and forest and forestland management in Maasim in Sarangani Province. Together, these examples highlight the risks associated with sectoral development programs in unstable areas that lack an explicit focus on conflict-sensitive design and implementation. They also highlight key opportunities to effectively harness governance-oriented natural resource management and conservation interventions to proactively support conflict reduction and peacebuilding objectives.

Next the chapter reflects on the critical factors and variables affecting the EcoGov Project that directly influenced peace and security outcomes in Mindanao.

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<sup>2</sup> The EcoGov Project is a joint project of the GPH, through the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and USAID, through its mission to the Philippines. Development Alternatives, Inc., is the project implementation contractor.

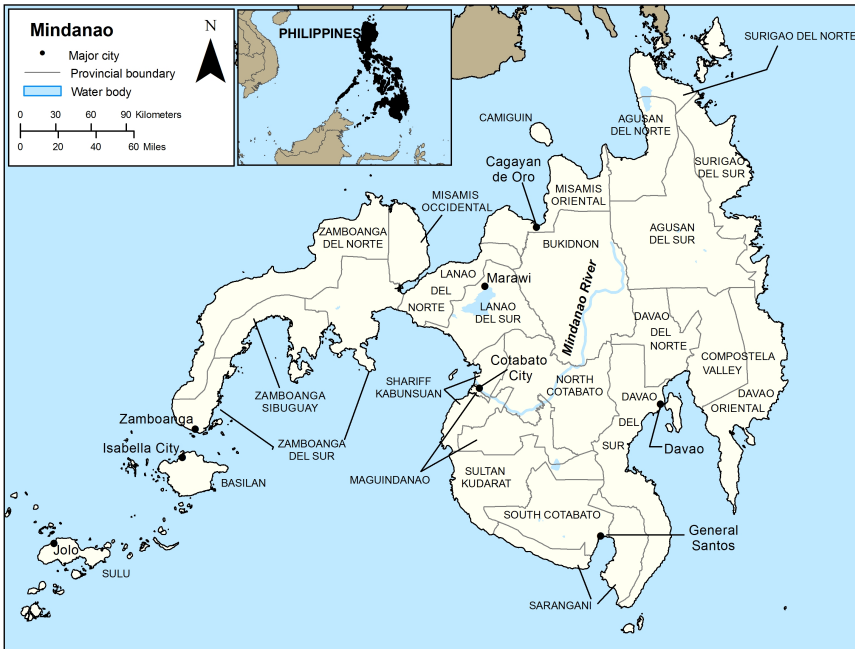


\* South China Sea is also known as the West Philippine Sea.

This is followed by consideration of lessons learned from the project regarding the risks of environmental programming and the opportunities it creates for interacting constructively with the economic, social, and political dynamics of instability and conflict. Finally, the chapter concludes with general lessons from the EcoGov Project experience that can inform future efforts designed to connect environmental governance objectives with conflict prevention and stabilization outcomes.

## RESOURCE-RELATED CONFLICTS IN MINDANAO

The conflict between the GPH and the Muslim rebel groups (the MNLF and the MILF) stems from the latter's decades-long quest for an independent homeland in the southern Philippines. The unrest has been stoked over time by the local Muslim communities' sense of marginalization from their ancestral land, lack of



control over natural and economic assets, and perceived loss of political sovereignty and the right to self-governance (Tan 1995; Rodil 2004; Fianza 1994, 1999, 2004; Soriano 2006; Tuminez 2008).

Prior to Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century, the Muslim inhabitants of Mindanao, referred to by the Spaniards as *Moros*, had maintained their own traditional structures of political governance, recognizable territorial boundaries, and clear concepts of ownership and management of land and other resources (Lingga 2007; Quevedo 2003). However, during the Spanish and American colonial regimes (1521–1898 and 1898–1946, respectively), as well as during the post-independence period, various land laws and policies were established that created a new system of land tenure that disregarded customary rights and the traditional local concepts of inheritance rights, community usufruct rights, and the decision-making power of the nobility (*datu* system) (World Bank 2003). By undermining traditional institutions that governed indigenous land practices and entitlement systems (Soriano 2006), the legal changes meant that both Muslims and Lumads (non-Muslim indigenous groups) were increasingly removed from access to power and to decision making over economic resources.

The formation of the MNLF in the late 1960s was largely driven by frustration over centralized government control and government-sponsored settlement in Mindanao of Christians from other parts of the Philippines. The settlement program was perceived by Muslims and Lumads as making unavailable to them the major economic assets in Mindanao. In 1976, the MNLF signed a peace

agreement, the Tripoli Agreement, with the GPH that provided for a cease-fire and the framework for the ARMM.

Although an autonomous government was in fact established for the ARMM, this failed to address Muslim grievances sufficiently. Dissatisfied with the state of affairs, the MILF formally split from the MNLF in the early 1980s and advocated a more Islamic identity-based approach to the struggle for independence. The MILF agenda includes establishment of a Bangsamoro homeland,<sup>3</sup> which is to be determined on the basis of traditional land claims (known in Philippine parlance as ancestral domain claims, which include not only land rights but also control over natural resources). The proposed boundaries remain a key point of disagreement between the MILF and MNLF.<sup>4</sup> In 1996, the MNLF signed a final peace agreement with the GPH, which provides that ARMM would have a legislative assembly, executive council, special regional security forces, and an economic and financial system. This agreement is currently under review, but peace talks between the GPH and the MILF continue unresolved today. The most contentious remaining substantive area for negotiation involves the concept of ancestral domain and the associated rights to natural resources.

In addition to the long-standing grievances of the MNLF and the MILF, economic development (for example, plantation development and mining) has contributed more recently to environmental degradation in Mindanao and added to economic displacement. This has caused a proliferation of local grievances in the conflict-affected areas (Umehara and Bautista 2004). Chronic uncertainty due to the sporadic and protracted nature of armed confrontation has also curtailed investment and further exacerbated the effects of poor natural resource management in the conflict-affected areas (World Bank 2003; Soriano 2006). Moreover, the Philippine regulatory regime on the environment and natural resource management suffers from critical weaknesses that affect the Mindanaoan context, including policy ambiguity, overlap of institutions and authorities, poor accommodation of the diversity of cultures, weak enforcement, and unfunded mandates.

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<sup>3</sup> *Bangsamoro*, or Moroland, describes the ancestral homeland of the Moro people. Bangsamoro was originally home to the Muslim sultanates of Mindanao (such as Sulu and Maguindanao). These sultanates resisted Spanish colonial rule and were therefore not fully integrated with the rest of the islands.

<sup>4</sup> “*Ancestral domain* refers to the Moros’ demand for territory that will constitute a Bangsamoro homeland, sufficient control over economic resources in that territory, and a structure of governance that will allow Moros to govern themselves in ways that are consonant with their culture and with minimal interference from Manila” (Tuminez 2005, 2; emphasis added). More precisely, under the Philippines’ 1997 Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, the term *ancestral domain* refers to all areas belonging to indigenous cultural communities (ICCs) and indigenous peoples (IPs), including lands, inland waters, coastal areas, and natural resources therein that are, according to the act, “held under a claim of ownership, occupied or possessed by ICCs/IPs, by themselves or through their ancestors, communally or individually since time immemorial, continuously to the present” (IPRA 8371, chap. 2, sec. 3(a)).

### 346 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding

Together, these issues hinder effective environmental governance at both the national and local levels. In addition, conflicting interpretations and applications of laws (for example, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act versus traditional Muslim land tenure concepts) have resulted in many unresolved conflicts over land use and competing land claims in resource-rich Mindanao. Thus, although historical and economic factors, many of which are related to land and natural resources, initially triggered the discontent, issues of power sharing, exclusionary democracy, and poor governance contributed significantly to the intensification of common grievances into collective violence (Soriano 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, both the MNLF and MILF peace processes have failed to resolve the deep disunity among a diverse set of stakeholders, including ethnic groups, ideological groups, clans, traditional leaders, and local politicians. The ongoing violence has further aggravated divisions between mixed ethnoreligious communities and magnified local conflicts, such as competition over natural resources and interclan disputes, or *rido* (World Bank 2003).<sup>6</sup> Conflict with the national government has therefore engendered local conflict that must be addressed as well if there is to be sustainable peace in Mindanao.

#### THE PHILIPPINE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE PROJECT

Since December 2001, the EcoGov Project has provided assistance on environment and natural resource management in Mindanao. After the 1996 GPH-MNLF peace agreement, the project was designed as a biodiversity-conservation effort that sought improved local and national environmental governance; improved management of forests and forestlands, coastal areas, and solid waste; and promotion of local government investment in sanitation facilities. Rather than reviewing all EcoGov Project sites,<sup>7</sup> this chapter focuses on project implementation in selected

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<sup>5</sup> Manuel E. Valdehueza identifies poor governance as the modern root of conflict in Mindanao (Valdehueza 2009).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of *rido*, or feuding, is central to understanding conflict in Mindanao. According to the Asia Foundation's seminal 2007 report (Torres 2007), *rido* is characterized by sporadic outbursts of retaliatory violence between families, kinship groups, or communities. It may be complicated by a society's sense of honor and shame. Although the triggers of conflict can range from petty offenses like theft and teasing to more serious crimes like murder, land disputes and political rivalries are the most common causes. *Rido* has wide implications for conflict in Mindanao primarily because of its tendency to become entangled with separatist conflict and other forms of armed violence.

<sup>7</sup> The EcoGov Project works with more than 150 local government units in northern Luzon (the northernmost island group), central Visayas, and Mindanao. It works in three conflict-affected provinces in western Mindanao (Basilan, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay) and nine in southern and central Mindanao (Davao del Norte, Davao del Sur, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, North Cotabato, Sarangani, Shariff Kabunsuan, South Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat). Engagement with the local government units is based on demand; priority during the early years of the program was given to conflict-affected areas in Mindanao.

conflict-affected localities in Mindanao where poor governance, resource-based competition, lack of community solidarity, lawlessness, and violence have consistently threatened to undermine not only environmental goals and overall stability in Mindanao, but also the fundamental objectives of the peace agreement.

The EcoGov Project's assistance in these areas coincides with the full continuum of conflict, from the transition and consolidation phases of peacebuilding in relation to the GPH-MNLF conflict, to the ongoing discontent of the MNLF, to the renewed fighting in 2008–2009 and the stalled and then renewed peace talks between the GPH and the MILF.<sup>8</sup> The EcoGov Project experience demonstrates that despite challenging circumstances, improved environmental governance and the implementation processes it employs provide an important entry point for addressing conflict and building peace. By improving natural resource management, the EcoGov Project is helping to address the major economic, political, and sociocultural sources of unrest in Mindanao. Projects have provided opportunities for competing groups (Muslims, Lumads, Christians, rebels, and the GPH) to work together toward a common goal and to find neutral spaces for dialogue, and have offered them a reason to set aside political, ethnic, and economic differences in order to participate constructively and collaboratively in decision making and project implementation.

At the outset, a major challenge for the EcoGov Project was determining how to engage various unorganized and often polarized community stakeholders in the collaborative envisioning, planning, and implementation of natural resource management activities. The project needed to reorient the dominant paradigm of competition and conflict into one of mutual understanding and common objectives, and to create connections between individuals, communities, and government offices at different levels so that the various dimensions of conflict would be addressed sustainably. This was not an easy task.

With respect to institutional interventions, the EcoGov Project assisted local government units (LGUs) and sought to change the attitudes and behaviors of individuals within the LGUs in order to support organizational change. The EcoGov Project's technical assistance focused on developing local government knowledge and organizational capacity to address threats to the environment. It also sought to improve transparency, accountability, and public participation in natural resource management. An intensive information, education, and communication campaign was accompanied by a broader social marketing strategy. Together, the two tracks built a foundation for larger relational change in diverse communities.

Local-level change was reinforced through the enactment of local support ordinances and through the formation and strengthening of local organizations and networks of organizations, as well as local governments. For example, the

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<sup>8</sup> Negotiations between the GPH and the MILF broke down in August 2008 as a result of the failure to sign the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain but resumed in December 2009.



### **348 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding**

EcoGov Project used participatory monitoring and evaluation tools that track specific sector improvements and progress in environmental governance, such as the Guided Self-Assessment on the State of Local Environmental Governance, the Marine Protected Area Management Effectiveness Rating, State of the Coast reporting, and an annual forest and forestland tenure assessment, which is part of forest land use planning. One of the governance indicators monitored was the LGUs' adoption of local mechanisms for conflict mitigation. Local stakeholders conducted the assessments and reported on the findings, and this provided a platform for both discussion and problem solving among the stakeholders themselves. The process clearly linked institutional change to public attitudes and perceptions.

The approach taken by the EcoGov Project is consistent with the findings of CDA's Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP) concerning effective peacebuilding strategies.<sup>9</sup> RPP found that two kinds of linkages were particularly critical to influencing "peace writ large" or a broader peace. First, changes sought at the individual or personal level must be connected with action at the institutional or sociopolitical level (that is, individual attitudinal changes must be reinforced by corresponding institutional and structural change to be sustainable). Second, interventions must simultaneously target more people (broad involvement), key people (individuals and groups central to the peace or conflict context), and activities to engage both groups must be strategically linked. While not intentionally designed to apply RPP findings, the EcoGov Project experience in fact reinforces those RPP conclusions about cumulative impact.

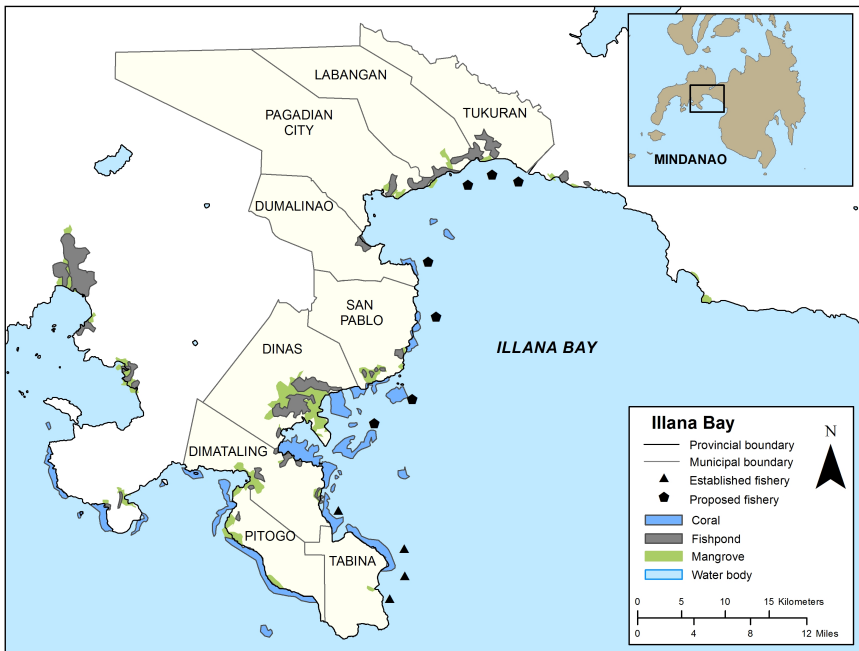
Although these strategies, in the case of the EcoGov Project, were employed with environmental and natural resource governance objectives in mind, the processes used in project implementation have contributed both directly and indirectly to peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao. The case studies that follow provide an in-depth examination of these issues.

#### **Case study 1: Coastal resource governance and stabilization**

Illana Bay is an important fishing area for four conflict-affected regions in southwestern Mindanao, including the province of Zamboanga del Sur (see figure 1). It is also among the most biodiverse bodies of water in the Philippines. However, it has declined considerably as a resource base over the years, due to factors such as commercial fishpond development (which decimated once-vast mangrove areas and rich fishing habitats), rapid population growth, upland deforestation, unregulated access to coastal and fishery resources, and harmful and illegal fishing methods. In the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of natural resource exploitation in the area, a few wealthy and influential families were the primary beneficiaries of the resources. This caused deep resentment among the local Muslim communities.

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<sup>9</sup> For further information on CDA and RPP, see [www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project\\_profile.php?pid=RPP&pname=Reflecting%20on%20Peace%20Practice](http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_profile.php?pid=RPP&pname=Reflecting%20on%20Peace%20Practice).



**Figure 1. Fisheries of Illana Bay, Mindanao, Philippines**

Source: USAID (2004).

Muslim opposition to outsiders' exploitation of resources in what they deemed their homeland became a battle cry of the liberation movement in the 1960s and prevailed until at least the 1980s.

Due to decades of GPH conflict with the MNLF and MILF as well as frequent clashes between warring clans and families, social relations in the area have become strained. There is a low level of trust between the area's diverse inhabitants, who include Muslims, Lumads, Christians, and members of other groups. Decades of conflict have also impeded good governance and economic and social development. As the MNLF has become disillusioned because of the incomplete implementation of the 1996 peace agreement, the MILF has continued to grow in number and influence among Muslim communities in the area.

Faced with increased competition over declining coastal and marine resources, the municipalities of Dimataling, Dinas, Dumalinao, Labangan, Pagadian City, San Pablo, Tabina, and Tukuran and the provincial government of Zamboanga del Sur decided to form the Illana Bay Regional Alliance to conserve, develop, and properly manage their shared coastlines. While the EcoGov Project's assistance to the alliance is primarily directed at improving coastal resource management, it is showing promising results in terms of strengthening social cohesion, improving intercultural understanding, and building collaborative capacity. These linkages are described in the following two examples.

***Resolving rido through the establishment of a marine protected area***

Labangan is an impoverished municipality along the northern coast of Illana Bay in the province of Zamboanga del Sur. Its population is composed largely of Muslims and Christians. A long and bitter conflict between four clans, arising from political and family differences, has limited development opportunities for the town. For generations, these clans have depended on coastal resources for their livelihoods. Conflict over traditional fishing rights has been one of the most common causes of violence.

In 2004, the Labangan LGU asked the EcoGov Project to help it develop a coastal resource management program to rehabilitate Labangan's degraded fisheries and revitalize its coastal and marine resource base. One of the interventions was the establishment of a marine protected area (MPA) to enhance fishery productivity in Barangay Combo, a site of frequent violent clashes between warring clans. This required establishing a no-take zone that would alter the local community's traditional resource access. Anticipating that this would be a challenge, public consultations and information campaigns were undertaken to raise awareness and gain community buy-in.

As efforts to establish the MPA began, the mayor of Labangan and other local stakeholders quickly realized that it was essential to gain the support of the warring clans, whose members were also among the most influential community leaders and decision makers. The mayor initiated a peacemaking process through the multisectoral and multiethnic Coastal Resource Management Technical Working Group, under the guidance of the local council of elders. The warring clans were engaged in a series of discussions on the importance of establishing mechanisms that would conserve the coastal resource base, which was the main source of livelihoods for the community. After several weeks of dialogue, the leaders of the clans reached a peace accord, which was signed during a public consultation on the establishment of the twenty-two-hectare MPA on May 11, 2006. Over the years, the formerly competing clans continued to work with the rest of the community to implement their coastal resource management plan. The plan included enforcement, monitoring, and rehabilitation of the MPA, as well as information, education, and communication campaigns. This case demonstrates that resource management objectives can best be achieved when local conflict dynamics are recognized and addressed.

The Labangan LGU's technical progress in coastal resource management and process-based progress in enhancing transparency, accountability, and public participation helped improve its credibility. That improvement allowed the LGU to secure international funding to support additional projects, such as raising mudcrabs and shellfish, to promote mangrove-based livelihoods for former MNLF combatants living in Barangay Bulanit. The goal of this project was improved governance of coastal resources, but the outcomes proved to be even more varied and beneficial. Today, the improved livelihood conditions in the area are supporting disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts by the GPH in this former MNLF hotbed.

### ***Recruiting former rebels as guardians of the sea***

Dinas is another impoverished municipality on Illana Bay. It has a mixed population of Muslims, Christians, and indigenous Subanen. The Christians live mostly in the urbanized areas, and the Muslims predominate along the coast. For generations Dinas enjoyed a wealth of coastal and marine resources, but in the 1970s, when the GPH encouraged aquaculture to increase fish production and exports, 3,000 of its 4,000 hectares of mangrove forests were converted into fishponds. This diminished the breeding grounds for important fish species and decreased the productivity of local fisheries. The gradual breakdown of customary property and user rights left marine and coastal resources under open-access conditions. This, together with population growth and the encroachment of commercial fishers, led to severe degradation of the coastal environment.

As a result of the poverty caused by long periods of conflict and the declining fish catch, more people took part in illegal and destructive fishing practices out of desperation. At the same time peace and security problems, particularly piracy, hindered investment and job creation in the area. With decreasing natural resource-based livelihood options and increasing poverty, grievances expressed along ethnic lines mounted.

In 2000, the vice mayor, Abdulbasit Maulana, suggested establishing a 104-hectare MPA. Community reactions were mixed; in particular, some people felt that an MPA would infringe on their traditional fishing rights. The vice mayor sought buy-in from former rebels by organizing MNLF returnees in the area as members of Bantay Dagat (Sea Guardians). Unfortunately, defending the MPA sometimes involved returning fire and even killing armed intruders. In an area prone to rido, the result was a series of violent clashes between families determined to avenge the deaths of relatives. Out of fear for their own lives, the non-Muslims in the community avoided becoming involved in coastal resource management.

Recognizing the need for a new direction, in 2002 the local government of Dinas requested technical assistance from the EcoGov Project to formulate a new coastal resource management plan. The EcoGov Project's involvement paved the way for an integrated approach. To ensure stakeholder buy-in, one of the EcoGov Project's key strategies was to form a technical working group with diverse ethnic and sectoral composition that would take the lead in formulating and implementing the municipality's coastal resource management plan, thus fostering participatory natural resource management opportunities and practices.<sup>10</sup> The participatory process fostered Muslim-Christian and interclan communication and collaboration. It also imparted a deep sense of local ownership and joint accountability for coastal resources.

Dinas adopted the new coastal resource management plan in 2004, including a zoning framework to rationalize priority use areas and clarify rules on access,

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<sup>10</sup> Previously, local communities had not been allowed to participate directly in the affairs of the local government, including natural resource management.

## 352 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding

thus minimizing resource use conflicts and related occurrences of *rido*. Positive behavioral changes have since been observed among LGU personnel, residents, and stakeholders who participate in the coastal resource management program. As Mayor Wilfredo Asoy said, “the culture of confrontation is gradually being replaced by one of dialogue and negotiation.” As a result, the people of Dinas are reaping the benefits of improved coastal resource governance, such as increased fish catch, additional technical assistance, and foreign and local donor support not only for coastal resource management projects but also for the improvement of water systems and alternative livelihood projects.

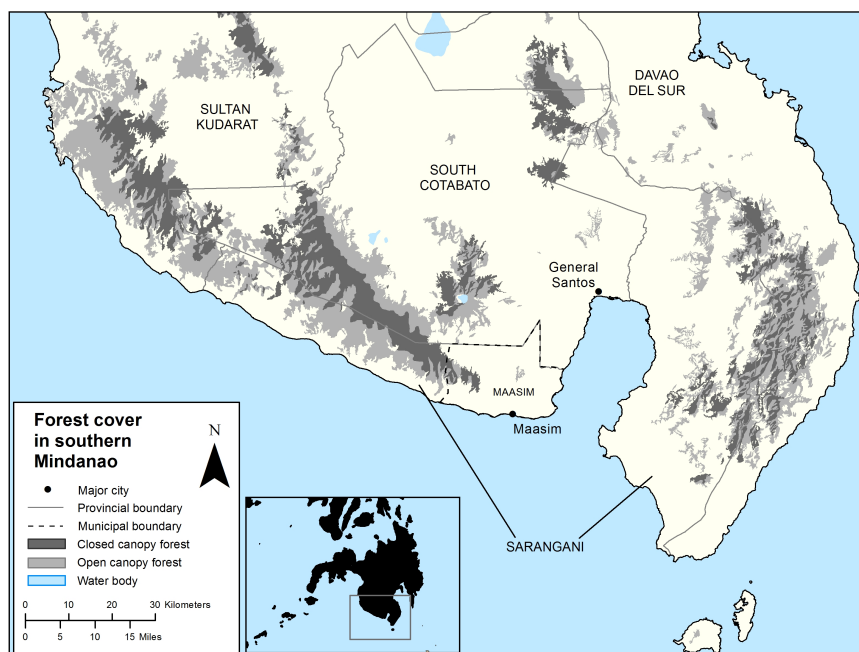
Building peace can be risky, and many of these EcoGov Project–supported advances came at a serious cost. Vice Mayor Maulana and four other Bantay Dagat members were killed in July 2005 trying to apprehend illegal fishers from outside the municipality. While setbacks continue to occur due to the still-volatile security conditions in the area, the LGU and community members are determined to face these challenges constructively and to ensure that their coastal and marine resources are protected and sustainably managed.

### **Case study 2: Transparent and participatory allocation of forests and forestlands**

For approximately three decades, the forests of Maasim in Sarangani Province were the site of open conflict and were used as a hiding place by both the MILF and the New People’s Army (NPA), the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines. In addition, members of the local communities, the MNLF, the MILF, and the NPA all sold illegally harvested logs—to support themselves and, in the case of the rebel groups, allegedly to buy weapons. As a result of this exploitation, the lush forests that had once covered Maasim were rapidly declining. (Figure 2 depicts forest cover in southern Mindanao.)

The mayor of Maasim, Aniceto P. Lopez Jr., realized that in spite of the security challenges, Maasim needed a comprehensive land use policy to help address the pressing problem of forest degradation. In early 2004, he requested technical assistance from the EcoGov Project for forest and forestland management. The subsequent partnership between Maasim municipality and the EcoGov Project led to the drafting of the Maasim Forest Land Use Plan, which was adopted in September 2004 by the Maasim legislative council.

The EcoGov Project’s assistance focused on prevention of illegal logging and conversion of tropical forests with the goal of conserving biodiversity. The primary strategy was to incentivize improved forest management for both LGUs and communities by strengthening land tenure rights and ensuring that local communities had equitable access to resources. The first step was to create the Forest Land Use Plan to guide land use and allocation. This step included three components: assessing all tenure holders, whether the holdings were state-granted or customary; defining existing issues, such as declining forest cover and conflicts over resource use in forestlands; and allocating forestland in open-access areas.



**Figure 2. Forest cover in southern Mindanao, Philippines**

Source: USAID (2004).

In Maasim, preparation and implementation of the Forest Land Use Plan has had tremendous positive outcomes, including improved land tenure rights, security, and access to forest resources; enhanced participation, transparency, and accountability in forest management; reestablishment of essential public services (such as farm-to-market roads); and public- and private-sector investment. Although the EcoGov Project’s intervention was not primarily directed at peacebuilding and conflict mitigation, the program’s consistent focus on fostering participation and transparency has contributed to constructive engagement of stakeholders, local confidence building, dispute resolution, and reconciliation. The Forest Land Use Plan addressed some of the most critical sources of grievances in Maasim, including competition over access rights to land and forest resources. Due to improved forest management, the political, social, and economic situation in Maasim has also improved, and the occurrence of local conflicts has thus been reduced.

### ***Building a foundation for peace through forest land use planning***

Throughout the development of the Maasim Forest Land Use Plan, the municipal government employed a transparent and participatory process involving a range of key local stakeholders, including leaders and other members of the MNLF,

### 354 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding

the MILF, and the NPA. A technical working group with representatives of local government, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), and local stakeholder groups was created to spearhead the preparation of the plan. Members of this group conducted an information and education campaign in all fifteen *barangays* (villages) situated within the municipality's forestlands. They also enlisted the participation of local communities in resource profiling, mapping, and ground validation. During this period, forest occupancy surveys were undertaken to generate data on issues related to the allocation, protection, and management of the forestlands. Members of the MNLF, MILF, and other rebel groups took part in these community-based activities.

A key component of plan preparation was a situational analysis, which culminated in a three-day workshop with stakeholders. This workshop included a stakeholders' analysis that provided an opportunity for all participants to share their interests, concerns, and ongoing initiatives and other suggestions in relation to forests and forestland management. Members of rebel groups participated in the workshop. Strikingly, MILF representatives brought a perimeter defense map that, according to them, was recognized by the Philippine military. The MILF map and the identification of other areas occupied by rebels provided a better picture to all stakeholders of how to strategically develop the more than 20,000 hectares of open areas and grasslands in the uplands of the municipality while avoiding causing violent conflict.

The experience showed that an inclusive, participatory approach to project implementation can significantly strengthen local resilience and promote peace. Ustadj Hussein Abdulwahab, an MILF municipal leader and the provincial representative of the International Monitoring Team for the GPH-MILF peace talks, said during the workshop, "We are happy that we are part of this workshop. We are thankful that the LGU considered our views and opinions on how to effectively manage our forestlands. We now realize the need to participate in activities like these if we want real change to occur in Maasim."<sup>11</sup>

The preparation and implementation of the Forest Land Use Plan and the stakeholder interactions involved in those processes have built trust between the stakeholders and the local government. As an indicator of this improved relationship, today more people are approaching the municipal government as the first source of assistance before they turn to the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples or the DENR for assistance. The collaborative and participatory decision-making processes also fostered a sense among stakeholders of local ownership

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<sup>11</sup> Abdulwahab made this statement during the closing ceremony of the workshop. The International Monitoring Team is tasked with monitoring the 2003 ceasefire between the GPH and the MILF. Led by Malaysia, it also has members from Libya, Brunei, Japan, and (since 2010) the EU. In addition to monitoring the ceasefire, the team conducts activities such as providing medical assistance and building schools.

and responsibility for managing shared resources. Community consultations and information campaigns have increased awareness among stakeholders of the need to work together and to overcome ethnic, religious, and political differences in order to effectively manage their forest resources for the common good.

As a result of the collaborative spirit fostered through this activity, local religious organizations (such as the Adventist Church, Islamic religious groups, and the Social Action Center of the Roman Catholic Church) have since worked together on tree planting and other environmental projects under the direction of the municipal government. As an indicator of the sustainability of the attitudinal changes promoted by the EcoGov Project, the circle of stakeholders has expanded and members of the International Monitoring Team joined other peace advocates and environmentalists in a tree planting activity on March 3, 2008, at Maasim's Purok Tabak, Upper Lumasal, inside community-tenured forestland.

### ***Using the Forest Land Use Plan to resolve a land dispute***

The situational analysis conducted in Maasim revealed at least seven different land-related conflicts. Resolution of these conflicts was given high priority within the program, since they affected the allocation of forestlands. At the same time, the local government wanted to create a peaceful environment to attract investors. As a result of this confluence of priorities, the local government of Maasim, with guidance from the EcoGov Project, created a multisectoral Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Council to facilitate resolution of land conflicts and perform other functions. The group includes MILF and MNLF representatives.<sup>12</sup>

The first task assigned to the council was the resolution of a twenty-five-year-old land dispute in Barangay Kamanga. The dispute involved the indigenous Fangulo clan and the holders of a 2,000-hectare pasture lease agreement, who are migrant settlers. The pasture lease agreement is a tenure instrument issued by the DENR that allows the holder to use forestland to raise livestock for a period of twenty-five years and is renewable for another twenty-five years.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Other members of the council include representatives from the LGU, DENR, National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, municipal tribal chieftains, members of the private sector, the Community-Based Forest Management People's Organization, and the Catholic Church.

<sup>13</sup> With the exception of vested-right lands and lands covered by ancestral domain and ancestral land titles, practically all forestlands in the Philippines are under the jurisdiction of the state and are administered by the DENR, which issues different types of tenure instruments for forestlands. However, other agencies—such as the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples in the case of ancestral domain lands—can also grant land tenure, which leads to problems when different tenure instruments overlap.



## **356 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding**

The land dispute arose because the lease area is located inside Fangulo ancestral land. The indigenous group of which the clan is a part enlisted the help of the MNLF and MILF to protect its land against the Christian leaseholders. The hostility worsened when the DENR renewed the pasture lease agreement for another twenty-five years—without coordination with local authorities or, allegedly, with the Fangulo clan—in the same year the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples granted the Fangulo clan’s application to have the land in question declared its ancestral land under the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act. As a result of these conflicting claims and the uncoordinated parallel structures supporting them, the dispute festered, and both parties armed themselves to respond.

Several meetings were held in an effort to resolve the dispute, but no progress was achieved. A breakthrough occurred, however, when the EcoGov Project and the local government of Maasim together proposed using the information in the municipality’s Forest Land Use Plan as a basis for resolving the disagreement. On the basis of the plan’s guidance, the Fangulo clan agreed to allocate approximately 600 hectares from their 2,000-hectare claim to the pasture leaseholders. The agreement was endorsed by both the DENR and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples. A transparent and participatory forest land use planning process had generated credible information and a plan that was considered legitimate by the stakeholders. The plan has been instrumental in addressing resource conflicts and in promoting peaceful coexistence in the area. More than ten cases of land tenure–related conflicts have been similarly resolved by the Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Council.

### **KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT MITIGATION**

The EcoGov Project experience demonstrates the important contribution of environmental governance and natural resources management in fostering lasting peace in conflict-affected areas. A number of key factors affected the success of these efforts.

#### **Capacity and strength of local institutions**

Lack of capacity constrained the ability of LGUs and other local agencies to effectively deliver public services or to play the role that was expected of them in terms of natural resource management and conflict mediation. This led to governance-related grievances among the population. Therefore, improving the capacity of LGUs and providing support for (or, when necessary, creating) credible local institutions—such as the Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Council—can fill some of the near-term capacity deficits and help governments be responsive to citizens, thus reducing grievances. If new institutions are developed to meet specific needs, it is important to keep government officials and institutions involved in order to avoid creating competitive or duplicate structures and systems.

## **Political will**

The success of local peacebuilding initiatives hinges on the strong political will of social and institutional leaders. In predominantly Muslim Maasim, although the mayor himself was not a Muslim, his personal involvement, sincerity, and commitment earned him the trust and confidence of the community. Critically, he was also able to persuade various agencies to support agreed-upon actions. In the case of the Illana Bay Regional Alliance, the commitment of member LGUs to pursuing peace is now evident in their willingness to work together to address *rido* and to negotiate with one another and clarify common rules on coastal resource management, which helps prevent conflict.

## **Local peace initiatives**

When the EcoGov Project was initiated, the peace agreement between the GPH and the MNLF was in effect, but that between the MILF and the GPH was still being negotiated. Although the EcoGov Project's forest management interventions mitigated local conflicts in Maasim, a broader peace was at risk due to the absence of a clear peace agreement recognized by the central command of the MILF. In the absence of a national-level peace agreement, more locally defined zones of peace and development can be established and supported by local stakeholders. When national-level agreements exist, it is important that they be complemented by local plans of action and by monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure that what has been agreed at the national level is properly communicated, implemented, and monitored at the local level.

## **External support**

Following the GPH-MNLF peace agreement and throughout the last decade of sporadic conflict in Mindanao, the development of various public services and infrastructure (such as roads, water systems, school buildings, day care centers, and health services) were assisted by both national and international organizations. External funding, technical assistance, and administrative support are often critical for bridging the immediate gaps in the economy, infrastructure, and basic human and social development services in conflict-affected areas. The presence of the third-party International Monitoring Team has also played a significant role in sustaining the ceasefire between the GPH and the MILF.

## **Incentives for private investment**

The promise of private-sector engagement and economic development can be a motivator for peace. For example, Dole Philippines' contract with local tenure holders to grow pineapple in Maasim provided local employment and helped defuse social tensions that were exacerbated by extreme economic hardship. News about a former NPA rebel earning 100,000 Philippine pesos (US\$2,381) in one cropping

## **358 Livelihoods, natural resources, and post-conflict peacebuilding**

spread to other barangays and provided encouragement for other rebels and community members to participate in the local government's forestry program rather than engage in conflict. Private investment has thus helped turn a former battleground in Maasim into productive farms that have contributed to the reintegration of former combatants and the premise of which has encouraged active rebels to surrender their firearms in order to pursue peaceful livelihood activities.

### **Security of project personnel**

When the EcoGov Project began work in Maasim, project staff could not enter the upland areas to undertake community consultations because of the volatile conflict situation. To facilitate their entry, field staff had to find local community members who had contacts with MILF and MNLF rebels to vouch for them. As EcoGov and local government staff demonstrated their ongoing commitment to the work and remained both true to their word and consistent with follow-through, their credibility was built; rebel groups were eventually persuaded to join the Forest Land Use Planning Technical Working Group and to participate in the consultations, which enriched the development of stakeholder consensus and a common agenda for action.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The EcoGov Project experience has yielded important lessons regarding the potential for environmental and natural resource management programming to contribute to peacebuilding and conflict mitigation, not only during post-conflict stabilization but at any stage of a conflict.

### **Building on shared interests and concerns**

Although competition for use of communal resources often results in degradation of the resource base, cooperation can be forged to promote sustainable use of the same resources for mutual benefit. This is particularly true in western Mindanao, where livelihoods, such as farming and fishing, are primarily resource based. Natural resource management can be a means to highlight common interests and promote shared responsibility among stakeholders and interest groups. Collaborative efforts build trust between parties and foster social resilience.

### **The “how” versus the “what”**

The determining factor in peacebuilding and conflict resolution outcomes is usually not a technical intervention itself but the manner in which it is implemented. For example, when transparency, accountability, and participation are built into natural resource management activities, outcomes such as improved governance, stakeholder empowerment, and reduced grievances often result—especially in areas

like Mindanao where local people had felt unable to participate in decision making about economic resources.

To achieve those benefits, it is critical that project implementers have a good understanding of local peace and conflict dynamics and focus on how the project will help enhance social and institutional resilience locally and manage points of tension. For instance, the EcoGov Project consistently sought to engage all key individuals and groups—including the rebel groups (MNLF, MILF, and NPA), Lumads, Muslims, Christians, the military, government agencies, local government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—in achieving common objectives. Working with only one or a few of these key stakeholders may not have offered the same durable solutions to conflicts in the area at the same time that it could have inadvertently contributed to certain groups' feelings of marginalization. Inclusive approaches are often important.

Under certain circumstances, peacebuilding efforts may need to take an indirect approach. Sometimes introducing terms like *peacebuilding* or *reconciliation* into a conflict context before the moment is ripe can cause tension or provoke a defensive reaction among the parties engaged in or affected by conflict, especially when the conflict resolution objective seems to be imposed from the outside or when parties are not ready to find a solution to their perceived differences—or at least to admit openly that they are ready.<sup>14</sup> In such cases, it may be advisable to describe a program on the basis of sectoral objectives (such as economic growth, biodiversity conservation, or agricultural development) and technical aims (such as improved market access, amount of protected area, or increased crop yields) rather than in terms of conflict-mitigation goals. The process of implementing a conflict-sensitive sectoral program can focus on bringing key parties together to build trust and social cohesion and to increase transparency and accountability while they work toward a common sectoral goal—rather than explicitly on trying to resolve the dynamics driving conflict. An indirect approach may be less threatening to parties entrenched in conflict.

### **Integration of efforts across different levels of governance**

A holistic approach to environmental and natural resource governance can help promote peace and foster stability, but to do so the intervention must tackle the underlying social, cultural, economic, political, and institutional causes and consequences of conflict. For example, investment in physical structures should be complemented by investment in social and institutional structures, which will improve governance. In addition, to achieve a sustainable peace, it is important to enhance or create linkages between positive efforts at all levels—family, community, local, provincial, and national—so that individual efforts are reinforced and strengthened, rather than taking place in a vacuum.

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<sup>14</sup> See USAID (2009) for a discussion of timing.

### Choice of indicators for program monitoring and evaluation

When designing an environmental and natural resource management program in a conflict-affected situation, it is critical to have done an appropriate conflict analysis to inform program design and then to explicitly include peacebuilding and conflict-mitigation indicators in the performance plan in order to trace progress and impact on the conflict situation. If the performance baselines do not take conflict issues into account, then a program's impact on those issues cannot be measured and tracked effectively. There is significant anecdotal evidence to support the argument that EcoGov Project's environmental and natural resource management technical programs helped to mitigate local conflict and had a positive effect on higher-order conflict dynamics; and much has been learned from a retrospective analysis of the program through the lens of peace and security. However, since the EcoGov Project's interventions were not designed in response to identified drivers of conflict or peace (per a conflict assessment) and did not collect data on conflict-specific indicators, there is little empirical evidence to prove their impact or to inform cross-comparisons with respect to conflict mitigation objectives. This hampers the ability to learn from and apply lessons from the EcoGov Project. Moreover, the monitoring and evaluation of these programs did not explicitly include an ongoing assessment of the relationship of the activities to the ever-changing local dynamics of conflict, so there is no systematic record of the intended and unintended consequences of the activities with respect to peace and security over time and during the different phases of the conflict cycle in Mindanao.

Although the EcoGov Project did contribute to improved delivery of public services, it did not attempt to link those improvements to a peace dividend from the 1996 peace agreement or the GPH-MILF peace talks because that was not part of the project objective or its theory of change. As a result, EcoGov Project's ability to promote peace and stability was not maximized, and comprehensive data on natural resources management and conflict—which could have been used to draw valuable lessons for future programming—were not collected. That was a missed opportunity.

### Engagement of potential spoilers as well as peace advocates

Strengthening those who promote peace and foster local resilience is a key aspect of peacebuilding, but it is often equally critical to engage stakeholders who have vested interests in perpetuating conflict. In the experience of the EcoGov Project, including both active and former rebels in various activities proved to be critical to mitigating existing conflicts and preventing a return to conflict. Providing potential spoilers an opportunity to engage productively and giving them an active role in peacebuilding and development has helped over time to make them peace advocates rather than spoilers. In order to mitigate conflict it is not enough to reduce grievances; it is also important to constructively engage the individuals or organizations that are otherwise likely to mobilize people toward conflict.

### **Entry points for conflict resolution**

When national entry points for conflict resolution are not available, or when a national political solution might not be workable (for example, when the GPH-MILF peace talks stalled over the ancestral domain issue), it may still be possible to pursue local entry points, such as environmental and natural resource management. As demonstrated by the EcoGov Project, even when national-level peace negotiations are failing, addressing local issues related to natural resources and allocation of benefits from those resources through transparent, accountable, and participatory processes can help resolve immediate conflicts while chipping away at deeper sources of grievance.

### **Patience and sustained commitment to peacebuilding**

Peace agreements alone rarely resolve conflicts, though they may end the violence. Improving the processes and strengthening the institutions needed for effective environmental governance and supporting attitudinal and behavioral change among stakeholders does not happen overnight. Addressing the underlying sources of grievance which fueled conflict and engaging key actors in the process of changing incentives for violence and nonviolence requires time and commitment. Change must be encouraged on many levels, from interpersonal to institutional, and that takes time. There will be setbacks along the way. In the EcoGov Project cases, it often took years for the opposing players to build relationships of trust and then begin working together to resolve conflicts over resource rights and uses. Tending and sustaining the commitment of all relevant actors is critical. In the EcoGov Project experience, elders, former and active rebels, religious leaders, government officials, academics, and members of grassroots associations were all needed to support the gradual process of resolving resource conflicts in their respective areas. The project's success was measured according to specific sectoral benchmarks along the way rather than according to difficult-to-measure effects on overall violence reduction or broad-scale stabilization goals. Displaying progress in terms of staged successes helped sustain donor commitment to the program as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

The EcoGov Project experience shows that governance-oriented interventions in the management of forests, forestlands, and coastal and marine resources can provide a valuable entry point for peacebuilding by directly and indirectly mitigating sources of environment-based conflict, including threats to livelihoods. In Mindanao, the EcoGov Project facilitated confidence building, dispute resolution, and reintegration of former combatants by addressing the central environment-related problems of land tenure security and access to natural resources through transparent and participatory management processes. Technical interventions focused on environmental and natural resource management were implemented

in a way that reduced grievances, fostered and strengthened social and institutional resilience, and constructively engaged the key figures who were most capable of mobilizing people for action (whether for conflictive or peaceful purposes) so that problems were less likely to erupt into violent conflict and more likely to be solved through peaceful means.

The international community can constructively engage in fostering peace and development all along the conflict continuum, from conflict prevention to post-conflict stabilization, by providing appropriate and conflict-sensitive technical and logistical assistance in sectors such as natural resource management. Their roles, however, should be those of catalysts, facilitators, and monitors. To achieve a sustainable peace, local stakeholders should actively lead and own the peace process.

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