"Humanitarian Communications and Lessons in Monitoring and Protection"

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For us at the Initiatives for International Dialogue, solidarity and advocacy have always gone hand in hand. It is the hallmark of our work. Be it at the local or regional levels: when we work among communities, grassroots partners-- mostly victims of conflicts in Mindanao, Burmese diaspora, internally displaced persons in then squalid camps in Dili, civil society groups in Japayapura, widows and peacebuilding advocates in Pattani-- all partners and friends across our borders. We have believed in the power of people-to-people, south-south networking, campaigns and other joint actions. Advocacy has always been both a tool and a process to support, protect and accompany the causes of the voiceless, marginalized and victims of conflict.

We have been believers and practitioners of "PtoPRtoP3" or People-to-People Responsibility to Protect, Prepare, Prevent.

Yet advocacy work is not a tea party.

We have always believed that the attention paid by society to the causes and effects of human insecurity has always been vulnerable. This is a continuing cause for unease especially during crises situations, whether they be economic or political in nature. The implications of aberrant situations relating to human society and how it is organized, how people behave and interact in relation to a specific crisis state, are continuing cause for action. How human insecurity is communicated in order to spur society to act and promote human security is a collective concern. The goal is to get the attention of society and provide platforms for action that aims to alleviate human suffering.

I speak before you knowing fully well the richness of our collective experiences, the wisdom accrued through years, nay decades, of working with vulnerable communities. I am also deeply aware that we cannot rest easy and be comfortable at doing things in ways that we are accustomed to. Our commitment to human security – in all its aspects – has always been nurtured by the lessons learned and the pitfalls clearly identified. It is an irony that we continue to do our work with the wish and hope of becoming irrelevant the soonest possible time.

This conference has the unenviable task of dissecting the different aspects of humanitarian communications: the geopolitical realities pervading today; reporting crisis situations,

representing the vulnerable and feeding media with images of suffering to spur action; the development of NGO communication practices; and of course, the ethical considerations that need to be explicit when communicating human suffering.

My task today is to present some of our significant experiences in dealing with information as it is utilized in the context of monitoring and reporting situations where there is need for advocacy. I will also try to provide some examples of how monitoring work can lead to protection.

One of the key features necessary for effective communication in crises situations is de-escalating the amount of time and resources involved for the intervention. There has to be some rigorous record-keeping to generate necessary data. But the bureaucracy involved in designing, fine-tuning, implementing, evaluating and reporting has become an industry in itself. A mechanism must be in place to make sure that every step of the process of humanitarian communications adds value to the overall immediate goal of providing information to generate action. It doesn't help that a lot of donors demand tedious administrative and reporting requirements that stymie creativity and instant action on the ground. I have a gut theory that this too may inadvertently contribute to the cycle of violence that we all want to prevent.

The question that begs for an answer is: who is the ultimate beneficiary of humanitarian communications? This can easily be established if it can be demonstrated that the process and the goal have indeed made a positive impact on the concrete realities in the field.

In our experience, we have tried our best to be advocates or articulators for the victims of conflict. Yet as we championed their causes, we found ourselves more effective in accompanying them in mitigating their issues themselves. The accompaniment takes on various forms such as: capacity-building; networking, policy advocacy and campaigns.

We have also endeavored to approach and address the issues on varying levels, platforms and playing fields as I mentioned earlier. Local, national, regional, global.

While we for example organize grassroots and community-based mechanisms such as Bantay Ceasefire (Ceasefire Watch) in Mindanao to monitor the implementation of ceasefire agreements between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), we at the same time facilitate actual lobbying by our grassroots partners with the principals of the conflict actors. The accompaniment does not stop there as there are other actors to engage: different layers within the government bureaucracy, donors, "spoilers", inter-governmental regional or global mechanisms and the broader civil society community as well. The engagement is multi-layered and multi-pronged. It is a combination of addressing the macro and micro terrains at the same time. If I may paraphrase the famous Oxfam slogan: it is "thinking AND acting globally and locally" at the same time!

Our Bantay Ceasefire work is a seminal experience in grassroots early warning engagement.
It involves the actual victims of conflict in early warning work themselves. Volunteers are organized from the communities that are the perennial battlefields in the war between the

government and the MILF. These volunteers are only armed (pardon the pun) with a cellphone and a vest that identifies them as Bantay Ceasefire volunteers. As they are steeped in the actual situation on the ground, they can easily spot or smell a brewing or potential conflict between the warring parties that were supposed to be officially adhering to a ceasefire. When this happens, the volunteer sends simultaneous texts to us, other volunteers, contacts within the warring parties and even the media.

We in turn sift through and confirm the data and act accordingly. Either to report the potential conflict to the highest ground commanders in the area of either armed actors or to their principals in the government agencies in Manila or in the rebel front's Central Committee in their camps. We then alert media and if need be, mobilize other volunteers, community leaders, civil society partners including religious leaders and respected elders to conduct a mission to the potential conflict area to try to diffuse the situation.

And if this still does not work, we resort to the power of mobilization, of direct non-violent action. We did this when despite incessant lobbying for the resumption of a ceasefire between the GRP and the MILF in 2006, both parties dug in and refused to honor their own ceasefire. We then organized a lobby mission composed of grassroots, victims, IDPs and advocates to meet with top government officials including the President and the top leadership of the MILF. The President told us that "it takes two to tango" so we should also convince the other side. She even deridingly asked us who do we represent and where does our mandate come from as she is more inclined to listen to elected local officials. We did not dignify her question with an answer. But we did tell her that we intended to likewise lobby the rebel front.

While engaging the two principal combatants, we also sought the intervention of Church and religious leaders to weigh in such as the Bishops-Ulama Conference. They then issued a joint statement calling for a ceasefire.

After a week, the MILF declared a unilateral ceasefire. The government did not budge. After a week with no reciprocal move from government, the IDPs and refugees flexed their muscle and organized an action called "Bakwit Power" or Evacuee Power. More than 10,000 IDPs lined the main highway in the heart of the conflict area holding aloft   banners and placards demanding a ceasefire from the two parties. Thousands of motorists became their main audience. The media of course covered this and before the day ended, the President sent her Peace Adviser to meet with the refugees' leaders and accept their petition. The government declared their own ceasefire a few days later.

Some lessons from this particular engagement are the following:

1. Monitoring should be primarily done by people on the ground; by the victims themselves, those in the communities; those in the battlefields;
2. Grassroots monitors must be linked to a network of lobbyists, champions, articulators, advocates, communicators who in turn mobilize public opinion, lobby policy makers, authoritative persons and other actors of influence; though they can be the lobbyists

themselves too; so the importance of building, broadening, deepening networks cannot be more emphasized;

3. Simple tools such as a cellphone, vest, motorcycle, outposts, posters, billboards are essential as they boost morale of the volunteers and offer a sense of protection and empowerment;
4. Partnership with national and international actors, organizations, media should be sustained to provide a broader, deeper platform that provides for additional psychological security;
5. Invoking, asserting norms, instruments, local and international laws by the victims are more powerful than when invoked by advocates, e.g. UNGPID, IHL, 1325, 1674, RtoP;
6. The process must be complemented with regular, actual or courtesy visits, of advocates, partners from the outside;
7. The victims of conflict must lead, evolve and present their agenda/alternative themselves;
8. Advocates must be independent (but not neutral)
9. Never say never, importance of persistence and creativity, thinking out of the box

While this type of engagement seem to address the immediate need to mitigate a conflict, the challenge is how to sustain this process. And how to strategically prevent the conflict from re-occurring in the future. The only plausible answer is for us to sustain our advocacy by ferreting out and addressing the root causes of the conflict.

This is where a network called the Mindanao Peaceweavers (MPW) played a key role. Representing the broadest peace constituency in the island, the MPW embarked on more than a year-long consultation process of determining a civil society agenda in achieving elusive peace. Composed of seven peace networks and steered by four NGO secretariats with IID acting as the lead, a Mindanao Peoples Peace Agenda (MPPA) was evolved to become a blueprint for further engaging the peace process.

Indeed, awareness-building and capacity building has to be complemented with continuing policy advocacy at all levels even during a lull in violence or the absence of skirmishes on the ground.

In order to sustain the presence of both our engagement and accompaniment on the ground and in policy circles, we organized national and international solidarity and peace missions to the conflict areas to meet with victims, IDPs, lobby local government and rebel personalities, media and other stakeholders. The missions also followed up our earlier advocacies with the policy makers in Manila and in the rebel leadership. The mere presence of outsiders and foreigners in the camps and communities in conflict is a stellar expression of solidarity that boosts the morale of the conflict victims in a profound way.

Our grassroots partners meanwhile forged links and networks with akin groups and communities within their area and beyond. They host exchange programs of interns from other countries who want to both learn from their experience as well as share their own. This

networking was a boon to the morale of the grassroots peace-builders who are empowered by the bond of a common experience with other peoples, other victims, other stakeholders.

This is but one example of how monitoring contribute to protection based on our work in Mindanao.

But I can tell you too something about how one of our regional networks in Southeast Asia, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict have tried to help diffuse the tension between Thailand and Cambodia on the issue of the Preah Vihear temple issue. We organized a cross-border exchange visit of Thai and Khmer civil society partners and reported this to the press in both countries. The visit has led to a sustained partnership between our civil society partners in the two countries who are committed to monitor the situation on the ground and are willing to be mobilized in whatever way to arrest any potential conflict.

I can tell you also about how upon the advise or our Timorese NGO partners, we organized an international solidarity, peace and democracy mission to Timor Leste when the country was wracked by internecine political conflict in 2007 that saw the attempted assassination of the President. The mission met with the leaders of the bickering political parties. As a solidarity movement, we remained to be friends with all of them. We had to ironically act as a bridge of sorts in relaying each other's messages to the other while reiterating their respective commitments to build peace.

I can tell you more how we are slowly engaging the ASEAN for the group to consider developing a prevention component to complement its dispute settlement mechanism. ASEAN as a formation of states has only committed to settle disputes among themselves but not within each territories. Most of the conflicts in the region are intra-state in character and ASEAN has no mechanism in dealing with such. GPPAC-SEA will be campaigning for the establishment of such mechanism akin to that of the ASEAN Inter-governmental Committee on Human Rights. We are also engaging ASEAN to recognize and consider community-based and indigenous ways of resolving conflicts.

Another important consideration in humanitarian communication is determining feedback.

Time and again, it has been proven that the most effective monitoring and reporting process is measured in terms of their impact on decision-making processes.

Measures to clearly evaluate impact is important in order to avoid the tremendous problem of wasting money in processes during situations where resources are at an absolute premium.

I offer no panacea, but there a few more important lessons learned that we can all adopt.

10. Every step in the process must be cut to their bare minimum, in terms of regularity and length.

11. Ensure that reporting monitoring processes have clearly identified added value to the decision-making abilities of the target.
12. Produce multiple outputs from specific processes in order to avoid redundant and multiple processes leading to similar outputs.
13. Effective and efficient use of new technology that dovetails into traditional community processes.

Monitoring and reporting are both processes and tools that must be optimized. One critical step that we all can wed into our specific approaches is that humanitarian communications must be clearly linked with specific decision-making institutions. If monitoring and reporting as approaches to advocacy does not lead to decisions, then humanitarian communications will have utterly failed, and the resources expended will have come to naught.