

# **Peacebuilders in Mindanao Describe Consciousness and Transformation Towards Effective Practice**

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## **Abstract**

What can peacebuilders in Mindanao, Philippines teach us about the dynamic interplay between consciousness and transformation towards effective practice? In this article, nineteen peacebuilders from Mindanao share personal narratives about their peacebuilding initiatives. They describe and discuss how consciousness of self and phenomenological realities facilitates personal and social transformation, which results in a much deeper level of consciousness towards a more informed and integrative field practice. In this context, consciousness and transformation become a never-ending process, each reinforcing and enhancing the other towards effective practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Peace, Mindanao, peace building, consciousness and transformation

A strong interdisciplinary literature draws on psychological, sociological, philosophical, anthropological, legal communications, religious studies, and political science approaches to explain what goes wrong in individual and group consciousness when regions are torn apart by war. We know about the trauma of armed conflict and its aftermath, the development of enemy images, the development of historical conflict narratives, social-psychological processes of conflict escalation, the trans-generational transmission of trauma, and more. But we know little about the consciousness and transformation of the people who dedicate themselves to peacebuilding in their home community. How do they develop in war-torn contexts, and how do they sustain their work in war zones? While research has documented the development stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, for example, we have failed thus far to learn from the many everyday heroes working out of the limelight in their home communities. What can peacebuilders in local communities, for example, teach us about consciousness and transformation, and how can that knowledge help us support the development of more and more of them? (Fuertes 2010, p.1).

For this article, nine local peacebuilders from Mindanao, Philippines were interviewed, and ten others participated in a Consciousness and Transformation workshop which I facilitated in 2010 in Davao City, Philippines. The study was made possible through a grant from the Center for the Advancement of Wellbeing at George Mason University. Participants were all Filipino peacebuilders representing the tri-people communities of Mindanao, namely: Christian settlers, Muslim, and the Lumad or indigenous peoples – two are connected with the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) – Mindanao, and the rest work with grassroots organizations focusing on peace, social justice and human rights, environmental issues, mass media, and community organizing and education. The average number of years spent by participants doing peacebuilding, that is, during the conduct of the study, was seven years. Two documenters helped facilitate the gathering and the transcription of data for this study. I will be using terms such as *peacebuilders* and *participants* interchangeably throughout the article.

The first section of this article explores what peacebuilding means from the perspectives of the participants, followed by

descriptions of consciousness and its implications in peacebuilding. The third section talks about transformation as described and experienced by the peacebuilders. Here, they used metaphors to bring home their message. The article concludes with a discussion about the dynamic interplay between consciousness and transformation towards effective practice as articulated by the peacebuilders.

Findings of the study suggest that consciousness of self and phenomenological realities inform self and social transformation. At the same time, such transformation leads to a deeper level of consciousness towards the deepening of commitment in terms of peacebuilding practice. Questions during both interviews and workshop asked the participants to describe their peacebuilding work and the shifts in their consciousness, including its implications in peacebuilding. As participants shared their narratives, they were further asked to define, if not describe consciousness and transformation in relation to self and community.

### **The Setting**

The Philippines is a home to thousands of internally displaced persons, ongoing violence, and potential further wars in the near future. The country has endured armed struggle, ethnic conflict, including conflicts generated by movements toward sovereignty, independence, and autonomy. They are rooted in the general under development of the region, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the lack of sufficient effort by the central Philippine government to integrate the Muslim population into the political and institutional fabric of the country (Global IDP Database 2005, p.5). The ethno-religious dynamics of the tri-people, particularly the migration of Christian settlers to the region, in light of the rich reserves of untapped natural resources and raw materials of Mindanao, particularly in the Muslim or Moro areas, add to the government's fight against Muslim secessionist movements in the island since the 1970's (Quitoriano, et al. 2004, p.11, Global IDP Database 2005, p.5). However, Mindanao is also home to remarkable local peacebuilders who continue to endure in their peacebuilding efforts despite conflicts raging around them. In the midst of risks and challenges, they continue to dedicate their lives to peace and justice in their home communities and beyond.

Dugan (1996) best describes the conflicts affecting Mindanao as system-level structural conflicts that emerged from inequities built into the social (and political) system. These conflicts are “institutionalized in a structured way within the social (and political) system,” she said. People knew that the conflicts affecting their local communities were a national level phenomenon, involving their respective central governments, including a plethora of armed opposition groups existing in their respective countries. Yet, within this context, local peacebuilders chose to work on the seemingly impossible task of building peace (Fuertes, 2010, p.3).

### **Peacebuilding in Their Own Words**

What do participants meant by peacebuilding, and how do they describe their peacebuilding efforts?

Peacebuilding for the participants is a comprehensive multi-faceted undertaking. It aims, to quote Rychler (2001), to transform conflicts constructively and create a sustainable peace environment. This includes not just fixing the problems, which threatened the core interests of the conflicting organizations or communities involved nor simply changing the strategic thinking, and the opportunity structure and the ways of interacting, but also the creation of a sustainable peace, such as the establishment of peace zone, which includes imagining a peaceful future, conducting an overall needs assessment, developing a coherent peace plan, and designing an effective implementation of the plan (p.12). The implementation of peacebuilding initiatives involves peace education and dialogues, capacity-building and empowerment trainings, community organizing and consciousness raising in hopes to increase people’s sense of socio-political awareness, initiate socio-cultural solidarity programs and environmental advocacy, as well as work with policy makers to effect social change. Participants believed that establishing a good relationship among residents in local communities founded on trust, justice, respect, and equity is vital to building peace. As peacebuilders, they considered themselves agents of change, giving voice to the people (Fuertes 2010, p.3).

While participants were already doing community organizing, peace advocacy, at the same time initiating interreligious dialogues

among conflicting members of the community, back then many did not label such initiatives as peacebuilding until they made a conscious decision which provided a shift in their consciousness. Joy Zabala of Basilan, for example, indicated that long before she started working on community peace initiatives, she was already involved in humanitarian services through her parish in reaching out local residents displaced by armed conflict. Until she made a conscious effort to continue doing her job, she did not consider herself a peacebuilder back then. Myla Leguro has been conducting justice and peace education before joining the Catholic Relief Services in Mindanao. She described her work as empowering people in local communities who were often victims of human rights violations. For people like Zabala and Leguro, their early community involvement was based on a felt need of wanting to do something right, given the socio-economic and political situation that they were in. However, calling themselves 'peacebuilders' only happened when they made a (conscious) commitment and expanded their community engagement further, complemented by peace trainings and seminars that they had attended (Fuertes 2010, p.3).

The phenomenological realities that peacebuilders mentioned serve as 'turning points' in their consciousness of self and peacebuilding initiatives. According to Mancini and Roberto (2009), the concept of turning points is vital to understanding positive development change. Sometimes highly visible, at other times apparently innocuous, such moments may prove important in opening up new possibilities, often in what may otherwise be unpromising circumstances. Resulting change of this kind requires four conditions to be fulfilled, namely: the opportunity, the readiness of the person to grasp it, the agency of the person to take active steps to respond to the opportunity, and a sustaining context which supports the change effort and adherence to the new pathway (p.31). As Mead (1964) explains,

... the individual realizes himself insofar as, in some sense, he sees himself and hears himself. He looks in the glass and sees himself; he speaks and hears himself. It is this sort of situation in which the individual is both subject

and object. But, in order to be both subject and object, he has to pass from one phase to another. The self involves a process that is going on, that takes one form and now another – a subject-object relationship which is dynamic, not static, a subject-object relationship which has a process behind it, one which can appear now in this phase, now in that (p.13).

Mead's statement marks a dramatic shift in the object-self, but one which is subjectively experienced as newly integrated (Bankston, Forsyth, and Floyd, Jr 1981, p.285).

### **Peacebuilders Described Consciousness**

Consciousness is commonly equated with awareness (Schmidt, 1990, p.131). What drove peacebuilders to commit in peacebuilding work was their awareness of socio-political and economic problems such as armed conflict, extreme poverty, and corruption on local, as well as national level. Such social awareness enhanced their ongoing process of self-introspection, self-reflection, and critical analysis leading to a deeper sense of self awareness. In this context self-awareness became a catalyst that made them do something about their situation.

Peacebuilders (Fuertes 2010, p.4) ascribed consciousness to what they call, *kahimatngon*, which implies informed awareness and understanding of social and personal events, enabling the person or community to take action. The notion of *kahimatngon* is akin to the dynamics of conscientization or consciousness-raising, used especially in Latin America during the 70s until today against the backdrop of militarization, human rights violations, and poverty. *Kahimatngon* is used in the Philippines mostly by community-based organizations in their educational and capacity-building campaign to empower local communities in taking constructive action to address economic and political problems. Consciousness, according to peacebuilders comes in two levels, namely: lower level and higher level consciousness. Knowledge about one's work and having general information about the kind of community they work with constitutes the lower level of consciousness. They referred this

consciousness to the time before they made a willful decision to work in peacebuilding, which involved commitment, courage, and perseverance. Higher level consciousness involves understanding the reasons behind their decision to work in peacebuilding and the meanings as well as implications of their passions and commitment in bringing about social change. Here, peacebuilders can reflect on the objects of consciousness and attempt to comprehend their significance (Schmidt, 1990, p.133). Knowing fully well the bases of their dreams and aspirations which continued to inspire them given various kinds of challenges and risks also constitutes higher level of consciousness. The notion of *kahimatngon* falls under this level.

Consciousness, according to peacebuilders, has different types.

1. Consciousness as a process. Peacebuilders ascribed consciousness as a process of finding connection in our existence in terms of interpersonal and social relationships. According to Rhodius Noguera, psychologist and grassroots community organizer, consciousness is a process of understanding life in every aspect. Noguera's sense of fulfillment always connects to the larger community therefore it is beyond self-gratification and self-preservation.

2. Consciousness as space. Peacebuilders viewed consciousness as space in terms of geographical location where the action takes place, and in terms of personal space that facilitates transition for reflection, analysis, and decision-making. For Leguro, this space was the place where creativity, meaning-making, and individual/collective processing took place. As Leguro's experience of consciousness suggests, it was in this space where she came to understand peacebuilding as a vocation, and define herself in terms of her potentials. In this space, Leguro was also able to establish a lasting connection to the outside, creating a point of convergence for inner meaning-making and ongoing self-development.

3. Consciousness as interconnectedness. For peacebuilders, consciousness does not happen in isolation. Context informs consciousness whether people are aware of it or not. This implies that there is always a social dimension to consciousness. The human and social components of consciousness were described by many as interconnectedness. Understanding consciousness through this lens

reflects the Mindanaoan collectivist worldview where peacebuilders came from. It is characterized by communal living where the notions of “we-ness” and “togetherness” are emphasized.

4. Consciousness as cornerstone. Peacebuilders believed that consciousness of self and of others, including one’s surroundings, is the basis by which the practice of peacebuilding finds its full expression. Tommy Pangcoga said it well,

Without consciousness, we peacebuilders don’t have the moral ascendancy to extend ourselves or reach out to others. We need to first have a good grasp of who we are, what we are, what we can do, what your limitations are, where we want to go, what we feel, what we are afraid of, what we are prepared to do. It hinges on that self-consciousness. If a person ignores that and just takes it empassing of face value then he would run the risk of miscommunicating himself to others and misrepresenting himself, including what he represents. That is very risky because instead of being a connector, one becomes a divider.

Pangcoga’s explanation connects consciousness to what Tisdell (2003) calls a glimpse of a truer sacred face, grounded in one’s own authenticity rather than who one was told one should be. These are the moments, according to Tisdell when one says, “This is who I am... even if it is not who you want me to be.” (p.139) Consciousness, which frees our sacred face, becomes an ongoing process that often involves unlearning the ways we have uncritically absorbed what others told us we should be. As Tisdell explains, claiming and reclaiming who we are now, according to our own beliefs and values, is a process of ongoing identity development that many have described as a spiritual experience or spiritual journey. Confronted by social realities, Parker Palmer (2000) says that we claim our own ‘face,’ our own identity, which involves much learning and unlearning in search of our more “authentic vocation” (p.140).



## **Implications of Consciousness in Peacebuilding**

Peacebuilders identified at least 5 major implications of consciousness in peacebuilding (Fuertes 2010, p.6). First, consciousness of social realities led them to self-introspection, which they described as a way to make sense of their conscious experience of social reality. The process of self introspection facilitated how they continued to define and redefine their selves in terms of vocation, their potentials, including dreams and hopes in life. Second, as a result, they started questioning and assessing their values and priorities in life based on what they believed they ought to do. Third, consciousness challenged peacebuilders to act, to do something based on their consciousness of self and social realities. Fourth, consciousness inspired peacebuilders to utilize whatever field-based knowledge, skills, and theories they may have established in order to strengthen and expand their peacebuilding initiatives. Finally, consciousness helped to define and redefine their identity as peacebuilders, providing guidance and direction to their peacebuilding work.

## **Peacebuilders Explore Transformation**

The word ‘transformation’ connotes different things to different people. It is used synonymously with alteration, assimilation, change, conversion, digestion, metamorphism, metamorphosis, modification, movement, mutation, shift, transfiguration, translation, transmogrification, transmutation (<http://dictionary.sensagent.com/transformation/en-en/>). Lederach (2003) uses transformation in addressing the harmful and destructive energies of conflict into something positive and constructive, including rebuilding of human relationships. Transformation in this context refers to a comprehensive orientation or framework that ultimately may require a fundamental change in our way of thinking. This constitutes what I would call inner shifts in human consciousness brought about by the influence that social and personal events have on peacebuilders.

Carpenter et al. (1999) describe self-transformation as a process as well as an outcome. As a process, self-transformation involves redefining the self within the context of one’s reality or lived-out

experience. Individuals must understand the meaning of the event in terms of how it will affect the self and redefine the self in relation to that event by integrating different aspects of the event into the self. Viewed as an outcome, self- transformation can result from having increased awareness of the event as experienced (p.1403).

Peacebuilders are transforming persons (Stein 1998). They are people who elicit our admiration and call for emulation. They are people who are in the process of transformation and therefore often incomplete, like works in progress. They are becoming themselves, yet they are also, oddly, becoming what they have not yet been. Often they are people who transform others and their surrounding cultures. "It is my personal conviction that only those who have been or are being transformed can be agents of further transformation," declares Stein (p.xxiii-xxiv).

For peacebuilders transformation is a by-product of consciousness and community engagement. One's being and doing within the context of community lies at the heart of transformation. According to Orson Sargado, transformation is a higher form or level of change. It goes beyond change of one's outlook and perspectives in life. It is living out what you preach, giving congruency to both words and action. For Noguera (self) transformation is anchored in the community and in the lives of people he works with.

### **Using Metaphors to Bring The Message of Hope**

In his book, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, Lederach uses head, heart, hands, legs and feet - basically the whole being, in describing the transformation of conflict. Head represents the conceptual view of conflict, that is, how people think about and therefore prepare to approach conflict. This implies two things, namely: the capacity to envision conflict positively, as a natural phenomenon that creates potential for constructive growth, and the willingness to respond in ways that maximize this potential for positive change (pp.14, 15). The Heart highlights human relationships which represent a web of connections that form the human eco-system from which particular issues arise and are given life. It further symbolizes life-giving opportunities that keep relationships and social structures honest, alive, and dynamically responsive to human needs, aspirations, and growth (pp.17, 18).

Hands, according to Lederach, bring us close to practice. Hands are that part of the body capable of building things, able to touch, feel and affect the shape that things take (p.18). Legs and Feet represent the place where we touch the ground, where all our journeys hit the road. Like the hand, they are a point of action where thought and heartbeat translate into response, direction, and momentum. What this implies is that transformation demands that we be responsive to real-life challenges, needs, and realities (p.20). Transformation per se goes beyond the cognitive aspect in addressing conflict. It involves our entire selves as represented in Lederach's metaphors using body parts.

To bring home their message, peacebuilders used metaphors as a mechanism in describing and articulating what transformation means for them, both self and social transformation, within the context of peacebuilding. By using metaphors, peacebuilders were able to express ideas (Ortony, 1993) and comprehend partially what could not be comprehended totally such as their feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) within the context of self and social transformation. Peacebuilders demonstrated their own unique ways of conceptualizing and articulating their experiences of transformation brought about by their consciousness of self and of socio-cultural and historical contexts. In other words, they had a way of putting meaning into what they experienced and observed around them. Meaning, from this context, refers to what is meaningful and significant to peacebuilders which, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), can be matters of intuition, imagination, feeling, and individual (as well as collective) experience (p.224).

### **Metaphors Peacebuilders Used (Fuentes 2010, pp.9, 10)**

#### **1. A Lighted Candle**

Imagine yourself in a dark room with no single light available. Most likely you will see nothing around you except total darkness. There is no clear vision nor is there a sense of direction. Now imagine someone bringing in a lighted candle, you will begin to notice your surroundings. You will see people around you. In this situation, a single lighted candle is all it takes to make a difference.



The focus of the metaphor is the lighted candle. As the candle gives off light, it slowly burns itself as well, which is part of the whole process of giving off light so others may benefit from it. It is only by allowing itself to melt down can a candle become useful. In transformation, peacebuilders had to let go of the old self in order to facilitate the coming in of the new. The transformative process demands a face to face encounter with personal biases, prejudices, indifference, and sometimes apathy in relation to local communities that need direct assistance and support. The process of letting go can be difficult and challenging for some, however their newfound passions and commitment in bringing about social change overcome difficulties and challenges.

## 2. A Lighter

Like a lighter that needs fuel and has to be turned on so flame will come out, self-transformation requires events or personal experiences that would serve as turning points or catalysts in bringing about a higher level of change, whether the person is aware of the process or not. Peacebuilders identified witnessing first-hand the destruction brought about by wars and armed conflicts in terms of displacement, death, loss of personal belongings and means of livelihood, including safety and security. However, being a part of post-conflict reconstruction initiatives such as education, capacity-building, rehabilitation, trauma healing, relief assistance, and humanitarian services, has facilitated inner shifts in people's consciousness which led to self-transformation.

## 3. A Growing Seed

The growing of seeds is called germination. Seeds require soil, sunlight and water to germinate and then literally grow on their own. Initially there is a radical that grows into the soil to find nutrition and then there are roots which grow out of this radical. A stem or plumule grows out of the soil upwards and becomes the stalk of the plant. Leaves grow from this stalk and then the plant takes shape ([www.flowersplants.net](http://www.flowersplants.net)).

The implication of the metaphor suggests that when a person acquires self and social consciousness, complemented by peace education, trainings, and seminars, transformation is inevitable.

## Consciousness and Transformation

Consciousness and transformation go hand in hand whether or not the person is able to articulate the process involved. Accordingly, consciousness brings constructive change in one's thinking, disposition, behavior or action. As peacebuilders immersed themselves in community-based peace initiatives, listening daily to the stories and experiences of local residents, and helping them find ways in their attempt to address socio-economic and political problems, their commitment to peacebuilding is deepened and enhanced. This is high level consciousness. Leguro, for example, thought of herself as an open-minded person towards the tri people (Muslim, Christian, indigenous communities) of Mindanao. She read and attended human rights, justice trainings and seminars. It was not until she lived with actual Muslims, Christians, and indigenous people in rural areas in Mindanao that she realized she held prejudices towards these groups of people. The realization brought her to a deeper or higher level of self awareness and understanding about her own environment and upbringing. This made her think of transformation as an ongoing process. These turning points described by Leguro are not just occasions for dramatic self-organization as Bankston, et al. (1981) point out; they hold much greater potential. They have special meanings to those with certain visions and aspirations. They are represented by a combination of the strong desire to take some action to resolve social problems with what is described as a new opportunity for doing so (p.288).

In Leguro's case (Fuertes 2010), the process of transformation was brought about by a conscious decision to change for the better. Second, conscious of the things that needed change within herself, Leguro, in collaboration with other peacebuilders, began to intentionally create an environment that would further facilitate and promote self-transformation. This transformative environment took the forms of personal and community rituals, prayers, sharing of visions and aspirations toward peace in company with fellow peacebuilders and community development workers, including faith-based organizations in the area. Third, the process of transformation required mindfulness by acknowledging the presence of each person and honoring the space that they were able to create (p.10).

Transformation (and consciousness) as Stein explains, leads people to become more deeply and completely who they are and have always potentially been. Transformation (and consciousness) is realization, revelation, and emergence, not necessarily self-improvement. The transforming person is someone who realizes the inherent self to the maximum extent possible and in turn influences others to do the same.” (p.xxiv)

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude this article with personal statements about the dynamic interplay between consciousness and transformation from the perspectives of the peacebuilders:

- “For someone who attempts to bring a positive change in a society plagued by armed conflict and extreme poverty, he/she must be mindful of the power or influence his/her presence brings. As a peacebuilder, I must be aware of the content, the methodology, and the processes involved in the implementation of my program in light of the community dynamics.” - Anonymous

- “The connection between consciousness and transformation lies in terms of being mindful that what you are doing liberates people from self-defeating dispositions toward individual and societal transformation.” - Amy Ramiro

- “My personal transformation is very much influenced by my sense of consciousness in terms of my commitment to peacebuilding, my values, and priorities in life.” - Orson Sargado

- “Consciousness plays a significant role in transformation. Through transformation, you gain a better grasp of who you are and what you can give to others as a person.” - Tommy Pangcoga

While consciousness as explained by peacebuilders facilitates (self) transformation, living out this transformed self, in the process, also results in a much deeper level of consciousness. Hence, the two become an ongoing process, each reinforcing and enhancing the other towards effective practice.

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