

Doctoral Dissertation

**Spaces for Business and Peace: A Study on the Role of  
Private Sector in the Peace Agenda in Bangsamoro, the Philippines  
(SUMMARY)**

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September 2021

Understanding the landscape of trade and business environment in a conflict-affected region such as the Bangsamoro provides an interesting case study on the nexus of peace and business. As the region slowly transitions into a peaceful society following the signing of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), this research aims to understand the role that the private sector has and would continue to play in shaping the peace discourse in the region. The focus on the private sector draws from the normalization component in the peace agreement where socio-economic packages, security, transitional justice, and confidence building measures were identified as key areas for the private sector to intervene. This research also covers the conflict narrative between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), an Islamic liberation movement that called fight for the right to self-determination and redress of historical injustices committed against the Moros communities. These claims by the MILF can be traced in the country's colonial past, series of State-sponsored land dispossession and migration policies, and uneven distribution of political authority.

In ascertaining the role of the private sector in a conflict region this research adopts the Business for Peace (B4P) framework, which argues that companies operating in conflict zones act as local partners for peace. This research undertakes a case-study approach in understanding the role of the private sector in the Bangsamoro region. Key informant interviews were conducted to C-suite officers or business owners based in Bangsamoro. C-suite roles or high-ranking executive titles in the organization were tapped as they have a higher stake in the decision-making processes in the organization. It should be noted that the overlapping roles of the respondents as executive officers and owners of the business stand as a testament to the landscape of businesses in the region, where most are dominantly family-owned. With the nature of the case study as being set within a bounded system of time and place, this research traverses throughout the life cycle of the conflict between MILF and GRP, including its contexts that predate the start of the formal peace negotiation in 1997. As for the location, this research is bound within the provinces that cover BARMM. This case study design is then further analyzed using a grounded theory approach to generate a unified theoretical explanation (Corbin and Strauss, 2007).

Part of the mandate of this research is a deep dive looking at the Islamic communities in Mindanao as historical trading ports in Southeast Asia, as well as a strong military force that resisted the State-making projects of the Spaniards. This is followed with a closer look at the policies imposed on Mindanao during the American colonial period, where land titling and migration of non-Muslim communities contributed increasing the frustration against GRP. This research reviews the context that led to the rise of MILF, including the conflict between the GRP and the predecessor of MILF, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), as well as the efforts introduced by various Philippine Presidents throughout the life cycle of the conflict.

Despite the level of insecurity in Bangsamoro, this research unearthed the role of the private sector that translates as local partners for peace. In doing so, this research first analyzed the risks and opportunities in Bangsamoro. Second, the perspectives on peace and security by the business owners were captured in order to surface their epistemological understanding on the conflict. Finally, this research identified the contributions that the companies made in order to deepen their link with the community and subsequently contribute to the overall peace agenda in Bangsamoro. Participants of the research claim that rich natural resources and the low labor cost in Bangsamoro have been attractive reasons to do business in the region. Nonetheless, the private sector remained aware that the region is plagued with risks that inhibited companies from yielding profit and subsequently threatened the overall business environment. Business owners point to the prevalence of criminality, underdeveloped shared services, weak business infrastructure such as banking and road, rido-related activities (or clan wars often triggered by politics and land issue), and impact of armed engagement between conflict actors as among the risks that companies have to bear. It should be noted, however, that business owners do not necessarily see the MILF as a major threat to their business evidenced by their approach of implementing a “business as usual” even at the time of heightened conflict. In terms of the perspective on peace and security, the private sector viewed conflict actors as sources of security in the region, such that one’s proximity to either a Philippine military camp or MILF camp, business infrastructure tend to become more secure. Contrary to ideas that MILF camps serve as military garrison of its armed forces, these camps stand as religious and economic polity whereby the organization

conducts Islamic teaching and economic activities. Thus, entities situated close to these camps are part of the scope of the organization. Kidnapping and rido-related violence are seen more as the bigger challenge in installing lasting peace in the region.

Appreciating the context in Bangsamoro, including its risks and business opportunities, and understanding how business owners view the peace situation in Bangsamoro aids this research in circling back to its main research question. Private sector activities are peace-enhancing endeavors that deepen its relationship with the community. This research uncovered that companies have hired MILF fighters into its workforce and recognized that some of its employees also function as community leader thereby assigning them into leadership role bolsters the company's license to operate. Further, this research saw how companies strengthen its relationship with the community by creating cooperatives that target vulnerable sectors of society, as well as promoting one's cultural identity through sales of weave goods. These activities reflect the existing theories in the B4P field where it claims that companies enhance peace through economic development, engagement in track-two diplomacy, promotion of rule of law, and contributing to a sense of community. In addition, this research argued that the case of Bangsamoro expanded the theories in which companies can enhance peace, and that is evidenced through the company's behavior of neutrality. This research claim that taking a neutral stance between conflict actors enhanced the company's position as a mediating institution and enabled companies to earn trust