Report from Mindanao, Philippines
January 2006

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines and one of the three major island groups in the country. The region is home to the country's Muslim or Moro populations, comprising many ethnic groups, and the collective group of indigenous tribes known as the Lumad. A bitter independence struggle has been waged by various Muslim factions for five centuries against successive occupiers. Due to decades-long land-grab schemes and the subsequent influx of settlers to the region, the majority of Mindanao's population is now predominantly Christian, a regional issue that fuels the anger of poor and displaced Mindanaoan Muslims and the separatist movements that have been fighting for hundreds of years.

Today, Mindanao also faces an additional challenge: growing pressure to develop, extract, and tap into the island's abundant natural resources is creating tensions across ethnic boundaries to compete for the remaining natural resources.

Promoting conflict sensitivity among development personnel in violence prone regions is a rising trend among peacebuilders, who have come to see the importance of frontline development workers with their direct access to local communities. Karuna Center for Peacebuilding (KCP) considers this an important aspect of conflict prevention and resolution and one that is likely to become more relevant as societies gradually grow more aware of the earth's limited natural resources.

In January, KCP partnered with the Department of Agrarian Reform of the Philippine government in the violence-prone region of Mindanao to deliver a ten-day conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding training program. Thirty lively and engaged participants, representing national and local government units and NGOs attended the program: 11 women and 19 men comprised of members of the 3 communities in conflict, who are Moro/Muslim, Christian and Indigenous peoples. KCP Executive Director Paula Green and KCP Associate Baht Latumbo of the Philippines co-facilitated the training, which was supported by the International Fund for Agrarian Development as well as Karuna Center.

This training emphasized the role of development personnel in promoting peaceful coexistence among the groups in conflict and in managing the agro-business interests that threaten the well-being and livelihoods of the larger community. For the participants, this training was their first opportunity to apply conflict sensitive methods in development work and as such was well-received by them.

Karuna Center developed this training through two staff members, including a director of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) who attended the CONTACT Program. Part of the mandate of DAR is to re-distribute land to the landless, much of it ancestral land taken by settlers or developers that had been held by local populations for at least 6 generations, thereby qualifying as "ancestral land." Those who are awarded land rights are also given various support services by DAR that encourage appropriate development and promote local technology. Some of our participants work directly with DAR and others belong to government units such as the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources or work in the NGO sector and provide trainings in gender awareness, services to remote upland indigenous communities, sustainable agriculture and fisheries, etc.

Conflict underlies all of these efforts and conflict often sabotages years of exacting work, so creating methods to surface and manage conflict without violence and revenge is critical to the development of the region. Lumber interests destroy the forests and the watershed, commercial fisheries result in stock depletion, mining projects lay waste to valuable agricultural land and agri-business sets plantations on ancestral farmland. Local Mindanaons, already beset by poverty, compete across ethnic divisions for the remaining resources and feel helpless in the face of external interests whose business plans ignore core needs of the local populations.

> **Conflict underlies development efforts and conflict sabotages years of exacting work. Creating methods to surface and manage conflict without violence and revenge is thus critical to the development of Mindanao.**

Our participants, local development workers, are on the frontlines of these inter-related struggles. Working in 4 provinces in Western Mindanao, they divided themselves during the workshop into provincial core groups, each with its own chairperson, so that they can apply what they gained from the workshop to their particular job. The DAR staff and KCP Associate trainer Baht Latumbo will monitor their efforts and provide continual encouragement and human resources. At the recommendation of participants, funds will be sought for another core training for 30 more participants, as well as a future advanced seminar and a Training of Trainers, to take place in 2006-2007. KCP, DAR and a large local NGO named KFI, Kasangyangan (Peace) Mindanao Foundation will partner for this follow-on program.

For most of our participants, the use of dialogues during the training where members of each ethnic community spoke openly about their needs, fears and troubled histories was a completely new experience, sensitizing them to issues of misperception and the common bonds that underlie disparate identities. Realizing that they could actually make a difference in their communities was heartening and exciting, and quite a new revelation. It is our hope that they will remain motivated to help bridge divides, shift biases and encourage nonviolent solutions to the myriad problems that plague their communities. We will do what we can to sustain their motivation and encourage their use of peacebuilding tools and skills in the service of sustainable, equitable and nonviolent development in Mindanao.

For more information about Karuna's work or to support this ongoing program, please contact:

KARUNA CENTER FOR PEACEBUILDING, INC.
447 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002
Telephone: (413) 256-3800
www.karunacenter.org ı info@karunacenter.org