

## Corona Pandemic: Strengthening the most vulnerable persons

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COVID-19 pushes the indigenous peoples in conflict affected Mindanao in the Philippines even further to the sidelines than they already are. The Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID), a partner organization of the Civil Peace Service (CPS) in Mindanao, is working hard for their rights - at present mainly in virtual space. In addition, IID provides emergency aid for those who are most affected the internally displaced persons.

"We are victims of wars and victims of peace." CPS advisor Karin Widmer hears this sentiment from the indigenous peoples repeatedly. The peacebuilder from Switzerland has been working with the Philippine non-governmental organization IID for several years. Together with her colleagues, Widmer campaigns for the **rights of the indigenous peoples in Mindanao**. They have been severely, perhaps even most severely, affected by the violent conflicts that have been destabilizing Mindanao for decades. However, the indigenous peoples have hardly been involved in the peace processes of recent years. **Discrimination, exclusion and human rights violations** are still part of their daily lives. **Displacement** is also still a daily occurrence - due to natural disasters and economic instability, but also repeatedly due to violence. Even COVID-19 has not changed this situation, in fact, it has worsened.

### **People, who are already vulnerable, are even more vulnerable due to the Corona crisis**

With the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, **the situation of internally displaced persons has worsened dramatically**. According to UNHCR, there are currently over 350,000 IDPs in Mindanao (as of June 30, 2020), **many of them indigenous peoples**. In the mostly temporary shelters in congested conditions, effective protection against an infection with the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 is not possible. The supply of food and other relief supplies has also collapsed.

Under the **hashtag #bakwitlivesmatter**, the IID team uses social media to draw attention to the difficult situation of internally displaced persons. *Bakwit* is the colloquial term for forcefully displaced people in the region - derived from the English term *evacuees*. With a **series of online seminars**, the IID team aims to raise public awareness of the plight of IDPs and to initiate appropriate support. In addition, IID staff together with their regional partners coordinate emergency aid in the form of food, seeds and hygiene products **in communities with a high number of indigenous IDPs**. This is possible with the support of international donors.

### **Indigenous people's concerns are important and must not be set aside – despite the COVID-19 pandemic**

In addition to these ad hoc actions, the IID team also needs to adjust their work to the new challenges in the short, medium and long term. With the **COVID-19 pandemic** in the spotlight, there

is a **risk that the concerns of indigenous peoples are further pushed aside**. *"While the government is busy fighting the pandemic", Widmer says, "in some areas, the threat of armed conflict is still existing or even intensifying. The ancestral domains of the indigenous peoples are the battlegrounds of violent conflicts, which they are involuntarily hosting and thus become victims. Additionally, the restrictive measures also affect their rituals and cultural practices"*. The shift to online activities also leads to less inclusivity, as access to and knowledge of digital formats is a concern.

In cooperation with CPS advisor Karin Widmer, IID staff members conducted a survey about the acute needs of IIDs local and regional partner organizations in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how IID and partners need to reorient their strategies to achieve impact despite the changed context. A main conclusion of the survey is that civil society needs to maintain its long-term **commitment to the rights of indigenous peoples and their inclusion in peace processes** - even if many resources are currently used for short-term relief measures.

### **The Civil Peace Service must continue to support its local partners in times of Corona**

The continued support of the Civil Peace Service is now even more important, as Karin Widmer affirms: *"It is important that the CPS continues to support its local partners and target groups in this situation and acts long-term, inclusive, partner- and impact-oriented. In doing so, the CPS should remain true to its mandate, while at the same time being flexible in adapting its support instruments as much as possible and needed to meet the changed peacebuilding needs in this crisis"*.

IID staff once again have proved themselves to be resilient as they organized numerous activities besides the important relief response. In the past weeks, they conducted several **online and offline workshops on urgent topics that remain urgent despite Corona** such as transitional justice, forced displacement, extremism, land issues, human rights, political inclusion and participation. Also, dialogue processes between stakeholders from politics and civil society continue despite restrictions due to Corona. End of July, a **conference** dubbed "Bayanihang Bangsamoro: Civil Society Solidarity Conference in the BARMM", which highlights the role of civil society and how they can contribute in shaping the newly formed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, took place. It was held simultaneously offline in Cotabato City and online on digital platforms. Still, **the support of international partners, among others the Civil Peace Service, is an important pillar** for IID to continue its work with the same strength despite new challenges.

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## **Background**

For decades already, the Mindanao archipelago in the south of the Philippines is affected by various and often violent conflicts. A peace agreement between the government and the largest local rebel group in Mindanao officially ended the armed conflict in 2014 in. Nevertheless, **violent clashes continue to occur**. The peace processes are repeatedly shaken by escalation of violence. Moreover, not the whole population feels sufficiently included. In addition, **the root causes of conflicts persist**: unequal distribution of land and natural resources, exclusion of a large part of the population, particularly Muslims and indigenous groups, and widespread poverty.

**The indigenous peoples are among those most affected by the violent conflicts**. They are victims of displacements, land conflicts and human rights violations. And yet, they are **the least included in peace negotiations**. Their right to self-determination, equal rights and the right to participate is officially enshrined in international, national and regional agreements and laws. But reality looks

different, implementation is lacking and they are still not sufficiently included. For this reason, many indigenous peoples consider themselves victims of peace negotiations.

### **How CPS contributes to strengthening indigenous peoples in Mindanao**

The Civil Peace Service supports several partner organizations in Mindanao working on the issues of indigenous peoples, to ensure that their interests and rights are respected. In addition to The Initiatives for International Dialogue ([IID](#)), CPS partners with the Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement ([MPPM](#)) or the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples ([NCIP](#)).

Among others, the cooperation between the CPS and the IID led to the formation of the **independent indigenous convergence Lumad Husay Mindanaw** ([LHM](#)) in 2017. LHM aims at being included as independent and equal third party in the peace processes. It is important to note that the indigenous peoples in Mindanao are not a homogeneous group. They consist of 33 indigenous groups, the so-called Lumad, next to the 13 groups who converted to Islam. The Lumad borrowed the term from the Bisayan language and use it as collective self-reference. **When the Lumad get together and speak with one voice, their chances of being heard increase.**

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### **Learn more...**

More about the indigenous convergence LHM and the support of the CPS can be found in the **CONTRIBUTION** "[Inclusivity is the goal](#)" (article in German) by Karin Widmer, which was published on the CPS website in April 2019. A short [VIDEO](#) (2'14" in Bisayan and English) also gives insight into the work and importance of the convergence.

You can learn more about **the work of the Civil Peace Service in Mindanao** in the eighth episode of the **PODCAST series** "[Jetzt mal ganz friedlich](#)" (only in German) by the CPS sending organization GIZ. CPS advisors Karin Widmer and Patrick Stutz talk about dialogue platforms as an approach in peacebuilding and their personal motivation.

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