

# Protecting Civilians, Building Peace in Mindanao



Era Espana, Chairperson and Project Coordinator for CRS partner agency Tuddok Linubbaran Ni Ayon Umpan-Enangcob, a group dedicated to the rights of indigenous people in Mindanao. Espana has taken part in CRS Grassroots Peace Learning Center modules and applies the lessons learned to her work in the indigenous community from which she comes. • Photo by David Snyder for CRS

## Protection as a Cornerstone

CRS began peacebuilding work in Mindanao in 1996. In order to strengthen leadership and grass roots efforts, CRS supported the establishment of the Mindanao Peace Institute (MPI) in 2000. Since then, CRS and the MPI have launched a number of initiatives to protect civilians from further violence. CRS produced a Protection Training Manual in 2009 and is working with MPI to use the manual in its curriculum to provide regional leaders and trainers with a range of peacebuilding and protection skills. In addition to the MPI application of the CRS protection manual, CRS provides training to agencies in such skills as human rights, humanitarian law and local peace accords detailing the rights of civilians, to incorporate protection into all levels of agency programming, as well as those of its local partners.

“We must protect civilians as a long-term project, not just during emergency response,” said Lory Obal, Secretary General of the Columbia Multi-Sectoral Ecology Movement Inc. in Mindanao, a CRS partner and a participant at MPI. “We attended the civilian protection training and we saw that this had to be integrated into the grassroots efforts.”

Since its founding in 2000, MPI has expanded to include peacebuilders from all levels of the social and governmental leadership chain, from clergy and non-governmental agency staff to members of both the military and police. Combining protection and

*“There are exciting possibilities for moving toward greater peace . . . .”*

Lory R. Obal, female  
Secretary General of CRS partner  
agency Columbia Multi-Sectoral  
Ecology Movement Inc.

The roots of conflict on the Philippine island of Mindanao extend back over 100 years. Since the late 1960’s there has been an increase in ethnic and religious violence. The central and Western regions of Mindanao are populated by Christians, Muslims, and indigenous peoples called Lumads. The mixed communities in these regions have been particularly conflict-prone. In 2003 and 2008, violence erupted between Islamic separatist groups and government forces, killing thousands and displacing a million people. Increasingly, protecting the civilians caught in such conflicts has become an agency priority for Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

peace advocacy into one five-day course, CRS' Technical Advisor for Protection facilitated the first core protection course at MPI in June 2010.

"A lot of the students had hands-on experience working with refugees," said Christine Vertucci, Director of MPI. "They wanted to get as much information from the protection class as they could, so it was really successful."

The course, attended by 15 participants from the Philippines and across the



Lory R. Obal, Secretary General of CRS partner agency Columbia Multi-Sectoral Ecology Movement Inc, takes part in a training hosted by CRS on the Peace Governance project CRS launched in 2010. Obal has taken part in both the Mindanao Peace Institute course work and those of the Grassroots Peace Learning Center where she is also a facilitator. • Photo by David Snyder for CRS

Asia Pacific region, included work on conflict transformation, fundamentals of peacebuilding, conflict resolution skills and mediation as well as the fundamentals of protection and protection programs. The CRS Protection Training Manual, served as the main reference for the new protection component of course.

"The manual was provided as a resource and given to the participants," Vertucci said. "It was modified from a CRS-specific reference to a more generic manual so it would be relevant beyond CRS staff."

### Developing a Niche

As protection becomes a more critical issue for international agencies responding to crises around the world, Vertucci sees MPI as poised to capitalize on the protection support and expertise offered by CRS. "Many participants", she says, "make return trips

to attend other sessions." Peacebuilding institutions as far away as Thailand and Germany have also expressed interest in partnering with MPI as word of the program spreads. In 2009 MPI was institutionalized, paving the way for growth and evolution as an independent training institute, with its mission to deepen commitment to justice and peace; respect for human rights; and dialogue and solidarity among individuals, institutions, and communities.

"I could see us developing our own niche," Vertucci said. "I think developing courses like this can help make MPI unique, especially since not many places offer courses like this."

Offering once-yearly course work for as many as 125 participants, MPI has graduated more than 1,000 participants. These graduates are not only taking on increased leadership roles in their countries and communities, but also sending fellow staff and colleagues to the course, creating a potential pool of facilitators for future protection training courses. The success of MPI has also spawned a local, community-level project called the Grassroots Peace Learning Center (GPLC) in Western and Central Mindanao, where community leaders like Lory Obal can meet with others to dialogue about issues relevant to peace in Mindanao.

"CRS has for a long time been involved with response to crises, but there was a growing awareness that knowledge on how to protect civilians and promote human rights was important," Obal said. "Now, GPLC is engaging in a long term process of peacebuilding."

As word of the success of MPI continues to spread, bolstered now with the protection component, Christine Vertucci is equally optimistic about the future of the institute and the impact it can have on building peace across the region.

"There are exciting possibilities," Vertucci said. "People know about MPI, we have a good track record, and there is a lot of interest."



CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES  
228 West Lexington Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201  
410-625-2220

[www.crs.org](http://www.crs.org)