

Sowing Peace Through Organic Farming for Food Security and Sustainable Livelihood in Conflict-Ridden Communities

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Abstract

This study determines the nexus between conflict, peace, food security, and sustainable livelihood. It is descriptive, exploratory, qualitative research using a triangulation method such as key informant interview, focus group discussion, and participatory rural appraisal involving the Moro National Liberation Front and Moro Islamic Liberation Front rebel returnees-beneficiaries of the *From Arms to Farms* program in Kauswagan and neighboring communities in Lanao del Norte, Philippines. The program has a unique approach to peacebuilding and rebuilding communities in conflict from the Disarmament Demobilization Rehabilitation process due to its “no disarming” strategy and sustainable agriculture as a platform for sustainable peace and development. Thus, the program fights poverty through farms, not firearms. The institutionalization of organic farming by the local government has promoted community organizing, capacity building, peacebuilding, resource mobilization, and empowerment of local communities. Rebel returnees were provided with livelihood and support services, which resulted in improved family income and overall livelihoods. It also ensures a sufficient, nutritious food supply and available food choices for their families and community. It has encouraged continuous learning and knowledge sharing on sustainable agriculture and technology transfer. Rebel returnees were transformed into self-reliant and resilient farmer entrepreneurs and leaders by example in organic farming. The *From Arms to Farms* program has brought about positive transformations in the lives of rebel returnees, their families, and their communities. Food security and improved rural livelihoods in communities contribute to mitigating and preventing conflicts and securing sustainable peace and development.

Keywords: Conflict, Peace, Sustainable Agriculture, Food Security, Sustainable Livelihood

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Introduction

It is evident that there are strong links between conflict, food security, sustainable livelihood, and peace. Conflicts nowadays, have a more localized nature, which implies that impacts on food security, nutrition, and livelihood also tend to be localized. The United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development recognizes the importance of peace for food security and improving food security, nutrition, and rural livelihoods in thwarting conflicts and sustaining peace (Holleman, 2017). Moreover, the 2030 Agenda sees the eradication of poverty and hunger (Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] 1 and 2) as preconditions to ensuring peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16). Conversely, avoiding conflict and violence is critical to achieving the other SDGs (FAO-UN, 2007).

Food security policies and programs build resilience to conflict (Breisinger et al. 2014). However, such policies and programs are immaterial in the context of conflict-ridden communities. Holleman (2017, p.xiv) suggests “concerted efforts by various stakeholders across many areas of intervention”. He argues that “food security and nutrition interventions will only have a sustainable impact on peace when implemented as part of a broader set of multisectoral developmental and peacekeeping interventions.” Thus, a sustainable community-based agriculture program is deemed necessary to empower people within their localities to actively participate in decision-making processes, such as in identifying, planning, and implementing programs with support from governments and other stakeholders.

On the other hand, there are diverse paths to sustainable development and approaches to peace. The *From Arms to Farms* program in Kauswagan and neighboring communities in Lanao del Norte, Philippines has a unique approach to peacebuilding and rebuilding communities in conflict from the Disarmament Demobilization Rehabilitation (DDR) process because of its “No disarming” strategy and sustainable agriculture as a platform for sustainable peace and development. Thus, the program fights poverty through farms, not firearms.

This paper describes the condition of the community in terms of peace and order, economic, social cohesion, and environmental aspects before the implementation of the *From Arms to Farms* program and its impacts in socio-political, economic, and environmental dimensions on the communities. It aims to enhance the understanding of how conflict impacts food insecurity and malnutrition, and how improvements in food security, nutrition and rural livelihoods can contribute to preventing conflict and sustaining peace.

Methodology

This study employed descriptive and exploratory qualitative research. Through a triangulation approach, it utilized various methods, such as a case study, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and the application of Participatory Rural Appraisal tools, like gender activity and access and control profiles, to highlight gender dimensions. Twenty-eight (28) key informants who are rebel returnees from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) were involved in the study. The participants consisted of 6 MILF/MNLF commanders, 12 members, and 10 *Bangsabae* (Bangsamoro women), all beneficiaries of the *From Arms to Farms* program. Representatives from other program stakeholders, such as the local government unit (LGU) of Kauswagan, the Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Training Institute (DA-ATI), and

the 15th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army, were also involved. The consent of key informants was secured before conducting KIIs and FGDs. The study used a thematic analysis of the qualitative data on similar and different themes from KIIs and FGDs. Descriptive statistics was also utilized, particularly the frequency count and percentage using the Statistical Package for Social Science for quantitative data. A literature review supported the analyses and recommendations.

Findings

Condition of the Community

Peace and Order

Based on the key informants' narratives and focus group discussions, the community's condition in 2000-2009 in terms of peace and order was critical and unstable. The wars in 2000, 2003, and 2008 resulted in the devastation and displacement of residents in Munai, Tangcal, and Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Kauswagan was considered a barometer for armed conflict between the government and Muslim rebels since President Joseph Estrada declared All-Out-War against Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led by Abdullah Macapaar "Commander Bravo " bin Sabbar in March 2001 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015). Kauswagan was once a conflict-ridden community that suffered during Martial Law and war between "Ilaga" (rat) figured armed Christian group and the Muslim "Barracuda" (fierce fish) and "Black Shirts." There were ambushes and massive evacuations due to war. Five (5) meters from the highway was considered a battlefield. Encounters between the MILF and the government troops were inevitable because there was no peace agreement.

Kauswagan was a "ghost" municipality. The area was critical due to kidnapping, robbery, killing, and carnapping. The government neglected them and had not provided support services to uplift the community's economic condition. In Munai, almost all residents were rebels and did not recognize the government. Even children carried weapons. People were fighting against the government because they did not receive support services. The government did not pay for the firearms they surrendered. Civilians from Munai, Lininding, and Tangcal evacuated to Marawi, Lanao del Sur. The places were no man's land; houses were burnt and looted. In 2007, there was a *rido* or Meranaw clan feud between Mutia and Luksadatu, and all the residents in interior barangays evacuated to Brgy. Poblacion, Munai Lanao del Norte. Kauswagan had witnessed and suffered from the atrocities of war, especially after 2002, when the Philippine government declared an 'all-out' war against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Future Policy, 2019).

The major causes of conflicts and unrest in the municipality were the unresolved land disputes between the Meranaws and Visayan settlers, the experience of discrimination among different ethnic groups, and inadequate access to essential services and development opportunities. As a result, many lives were lost, and many development opportunities were missed. The town deteriorated due to corruption, ineffective local government units, disunity among municipal officials due to vested political and economic interests, rampant mismanagement of public funds and tax collections, and an increased poverty incidence level to 79% in 2008 (Assisi Development Foundation, 2021).

Economic

Due to repeated conflicts such as *rido* and wars, the economic condition was poor. People depended only on relief from Local Government Units (NGOs) since they did not have stable jobs and incomes. Rebels or combatants had no income and relied on their supporters' donations. No investors; people were afraid to put up businesses and livelihoods due to war. Some were only involved in small businesses for daily survival. Farmers left their farms; landowners decided to sell their coconut farms due to the scenario that now and then, there was an outlaw. The local governance was not sound, and no support services were provided to the communities. No infrastructure facilities such as water systems, farm-to-market roads, electricity, post harvest facilities, and transport facilities supporting agriculture. Huge losses in properties and agriculture were reported, and thousands of residents were affected and displaced. Kauswagan was ranked with a high poverty incidence rate of 79% in 2009 (ATI, 2019). Massive displacement and dislocation of communities led to health, education, and economic deterioration. The situation also created an atmosphere of mistrust between the Muslims and the Christians (Galing Pook, 2013).

Social Cohesion

There used to be a harmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians. Some of the Christians were born in Muslim communities such as Cayontor, Paiton, and Tingin-Tingin. However, due to conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Christians and Muslims no longer co-exist. Christians no longer lived in the hinterlands, and Meranaws did not live in coastal areas. The local people had lost their trust in the government. People were fighting against the government because they felt neglected by the government. Rebel returnees lost their trust in the government because the government did not pay for the firearms they surrendered. They questioned the government's sincerity since the promised livelihood assistance and other support were not granted (ATI, 2019).

Environmental

Meanwhile, natural resources were not utilized. Agricultural lands in Munai and Kauswagan could have been more productive. Most of the farmlands were in the uplands. Farming was just survival; it was monocropping, non-irrigated, chemical-based, synthetic, or inorganic. The soil was acidic. The main crops planted were cassava, corn, and upland rice for family consumption. Even the simplest technology of rice was absent. People in Cayontor and Tingin-Tingin were known as producers of upland rice but not vegetable farmers. In Munai and Tangcal, farmlands were fertile, but farming activity was minimal due to wars and the absence of irrigation. During droughts and rainy seasons, farming was a failure. Streams and springs were water sources; however, these were not developed for potable water and farming.

Furthermore, the major causes of conflicts and unrest in the municipality were the unresolved land disputes between the Meranaws and Visayan settlers, the experience of discrimination among different ethnic groups, and inadequate access to essential services and development opportunities. As a result, many lives were lost, and many development opportunities were missed. The town deteriorated due to corruption, ineffective local government units, disunity among municipal officials due to vested political and economic interests, rampant mismanagement of public funds and tax collections, and an increased poverty incidence level

to 79% in 2008 (Assisi Development Foundation, 2021). Poverty, hunger and food insecurity, together with a highly unequal distribution of income, land and other material goods, can create feelings of anger, hopelessness and injustice among different sectors of the population. There may also be a perceived lack of support from formal and informal institutions in addressing the risks of human and food insecurity (Holleman, 2017).

Data indicate that conflict reduces food availability impacting agricultural production by destroying agricultural assets and infrastructures (Breisinger et al., 2014). Moreover, data imply that poverty, hunger, food insecurity, poor governance, and government negligence in providing support services and infrastructures to address human and food insecurity create feelings of anger, hopelessness, and distrust in the government. Breisinger et al. (2014) and Holleman et al. (2017) pointed out poverty, inequalities in income, land and natural resources, poor governance, and lack of support from formal and informal institutions to address the risks of human and food insecurity as key drivers of conflict.

Impacts of the From Arms to Farms Program

The findings of the study revealed that the *From Arms to Farms* program resulted in positive transformations in the lives of rebel returnees, their families, and their communities.

Socio-Political Aspect

The *From Arms to Farms* program has paved the way for the Local Government Units (LGU) of Kauswagan to institutionalize organic farming through a municipal ordinance declaring Kauswagan “an organic farming municipality.” In collaboration and partnerships with other stakeholders, the LGU provided funding, capacity-building and policy support. The LGU-Kauswagan used various strategies for the promotion, advocacy, and sustainability of sustainable agriculture programs in the municipality, such as the establishment of demonstration farms at the different levels (household, communal, Barangay Local Government Unit, Local Government Unit, Gulayan sa Paaralan); the Agro and Aqua Organic Agriculture Fair during April 19-25 every year. There is also the active participation of NGOs, POs, Cooperatives, and Associations in Local Special Bodies, especially the Local Development Council. This implies that food security and nutrition interventions will only have a sustainable impact on peace when implemented as part of a broader set of multi-sector developmental and peacekeeping interventions (Holleman et al., 2017). Moreover, the case shows that limited measures taken by the central government can be supplemented by local action for a sustainable solution (UCLG Peace Prize, 2016).

Sustainable development programs ought to invest significant resources in developing the local social capital necessary to maintain performance over the long run (Pretty, 2002; Reij & Waters-Bayer, 2002) as cited in Mog (2004). Listening to the local people and following their advice was key to the program's success (Heindorf, 2019). The program made remarkable strides in community organizing and capacity building in conflict-ridden communities within and outside the municipality. The *From Arms to Far* program facilitated rebel returnees to organize their respective communities and provided them with capacity-building training/seminars. Moral value formation is integrated into organic farming to improve farmers' well-being. Technical assistance is provided to people's organizations (POs) in making project proposals to access support services from NGOs, GO, and private. Ten (10) rebel returnees associations registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and are in the process of accreditation to Cooperative Development Authority (CDA).

People's organizations have mobilized resources from their membership fees and monthly dues aside from the funds accessed from NGOs, GOs, and the private sector and used them for income-generating projects. It also promoted continuous learning and knowledge sharing on various sustainable agriculture strategies among rebel returnees, facilitating technology transfer. Gender roles and cooperation were evident within the family and the community, helping families to stay intact and spend quality time together. After joining the program, most (90%) rebel returnees acknowledged undergoing self-transformation, helping them become self-reliant and resilient farmer entrepreneurs. Commanders who joined the program also transitioned into leadership roles, setting a positive example in farming practices. Farmer rebel returnees developed a good disposition, self-esteem, faith in God, and trust in their leaders to improve their communities. These are manifested from the responses shared by research participants,

Ang pagpanguma negosyo gihapon. Nagtanom mi og saging, gabaligya pud og seedling pwede pud mi suholan pagtanom og saging.

“Farming is also a business. We planted bananas and also sold seedlings. We also offer our labor for hire. We plant bananas to other farms for additional income.”

Ang gihatag nga financial assistance kantidad og PhP150,000 sa DA-ATI gigamit sa pagpalambo sa uma. Gikuha ang tanan sa pagpanukad, palit og hayupan, gipuhunan og ginagmay nga negosyo, pangompra og tibuok lubi, ug nakapalit og luna.

“The financial assistance worth PhP150,000 given to me by DA-ATI was used for farm development, to buy livestock, draft animals, and a farm lot, and for capital for a small business like buying and selling coconuts.” (Chair Sacar, 46 years old)

Leader ug model, nakita gyud ko nila naggunit og pala, nag-actual sa pagpanguma. “Lingaw kaayo ko sa pag-atiman sa akong farm, fishpond, ug livestock.”

“I am a leader and a model. They have seen me holding a shovel and doing actual farming. ‘I enjoyed taking care of my farm, fishpond and livestock.’” (Kumander Benjie, 60 years old)

Miyatembang sa kapamomolaan so manga membro. Miyaka-iwas sa kapMarites. “Members got busy in organic farming and avoided gossip-mongering.” (Bangsabae)

Ako proud nga mag-uuma, ang gi buhi sa pamilya agi sa siningutan, kinugihan.

“I am a proud farmer. I can provide for my family through sweats and hard work.” (Chair Sacar, 60 years old)

Tibuok pamilya magtinabangay, walay suholay aron ang budget sa pagkaon gamiton. Tulo (3) mi kabuok nag-ugmad, kauban nako duha (2) ka anak lalaki. Sa nakabalo na sila nag-separate na og umahan.

“The whole family works together. We do not hire labor and use the budget for food instead. Together with my two sons, we do farming. When they were knowledgeable and skillful enough, they separated and developed their own farms.” (Chair Sacar, 46 years old)

Sa una, dili ko ka-serbisyo sa akong pamilya. Karon, kada adlaw nako nila makita. Nalipay akong pamilya wala ko namatay sa giyera.

“Before, I did not get to serve my family. But now, they get to see me every day. My family is happy that I did not die in war.” (Kumander Benjie, 60 years old)

Lingaw kaayo ko og atiman sa akong livestock ug fishpond.

“I really enjoyed managing my livestock and fishpond.” (Benjie, 60 years old)

Economic Aspect

The program has helped reduce inequality by affording access and distributing benefits among rebel returnees, regardless of geographic location, gender, and social status. Rebel returnees increased their family income now compared before with estimated monthly earnings of a minimum of PhP10,001-20,000 and a maximum of PhP50,000 and above (PhP20,954). Moreover, the program has transformed rebel returnees into farmers and entrepreneurs. The program has offered various livelihood options in farming. Rebel returnees have acquired livelihood and entrepreneurial skills from their training and exposure. They are also encouraged to produce more to sell and generate income. Thus, the program helps the rebel returnees find ways to reduce risk and increase resilience through various livelihood options. Their socio-economic condition before, as described by some commanders and ordinary members,

MNLF pa ko, lisud kaayo ang kahintang, walay sweldo, depende lang sa ihatag nga suporta, depende sa naay malooy.

“When I was still a MNLF, my situation was difficult, with no salary. We only depend on the support given, depending on who feels pity for us.” (Kumander Batman, 62 years old)

Sugod og kalisud, gubat diri, gubat didto. Walay hayop bisan kanding, isa ra ka hinagiban ang nabilin, lagalaw.

“We started from the worst, the war here and there. No livestock, even a goat, only one tool I had, a bolo or *lagalaw*.” (Chair Sacar, 46 years old)

Sa pagpananom og gulay, naay kwarta kanunay, dili kinahanglan ang kapital, kahago ug singot ra.

“In vegetable farming, there is always money. It does not need a capital, only sweat and hard work.” (Ibra, 41 years old)

Dako kaayo ang pasalamat kay Mayor Arnado kay naharuhay na. Ang programa nakahaw-as sa kapit-os sa mga tawo.

“So thankful to Mayor Arnado because our economic condition is better now. The program uplifted the living condition of the people.” (Azis, 25 years old)

Ako ang nagpasiugda sa ATM sa pagpanguma. Adunay annual, quarterly, monthly ug weekly. Sama sa pinya tinuig, lubi quarterly, saging ug vermi monthly. Ang vermi production maoy nakapahaw-as kanamo sa kalisud. Gikan sa pinakaubos nga ang-ang niuswag gyud.

“I was the one who promoted Automated Teller Machine (ATM) in farming in different modes depending on harvesting times like annual, quarterly, monthly, and weekly. Pineapples, for example, can be harvested annually, coconuts are quarterly, and bananas and vermicompost are monthly. Vermi production uplifted us from poverty. From the lowest level, we improved.” (Chair Sacar, 46 years old)

To improve people's resilience to weather shocks and lower the incentive for participating in conflict "sustainably," alternative income sources, economic growth, and diversification are

needed in addition to social protection (Breisinger et al., 2014). Hence, a more diverse livelihood base is more sustainable as shocks to one or more components can be compensated for by enhancing others (Morse & McNamara, 2013).

Household-level food security is a pre-condition for community-level food security. There is a sufficient food supply and available food choices for their families and communities-upland rice as a staple food, vegetables, livestock, and fish for their viand needs, as cited by 89%. Some of the commanders and Bangsabae have shared,

Kada harvest sa organic upland rice dili moubos sa singkwenta (50) ka sako para konsumo ra sa pamilya.

“Every harvest, at least 50 sacks of organic upland rice are reserved for family's consumption only.” (Kumander Benjie, 60 years old)

Wala nahutdan og pagkaon.

“We never ran out of food.” (Kumander/SB Malic, 49 years old)

Miyabibo so pagkain ka kagiya ko miyawna na daa khakan.

“Enough food is now available compared before.” (Bangsabae)

A majority (89%) of rebel returnees have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The family is safe from chemicals because their food is organically-grown, fresh, and nutritious, such as upland rice, vegetables, fish (tilapia) from fishpond, and native chicken.

Healthy, no need mag-exercise kay busy sa uma. Konsumo organic upland rice ug gulay. Sud-an, tilapia presko dili puno sa ice.

“We are healthy. We do not need to exercise since we are busy farming. We consume organic upland rice and vegetables. Our viand is fresh tilapia.” (Kumander Benjie, 60 years old)

Healthy mga anak, ilikay sa mga pagkaon nga dili organic, kaon gyud og gulay, preskong tilapia mamingwit lang, naa pay bisaya nga manok.

“My children are healthy. Eating inorganic foods is avoided. They eat vegetables, fresh tilapia from fishpond in the backyard and native chicken.” (Kumander/SB Malic, 49 years old)

Furthermore, some were able to send their children up to college in private schools and became professionals. Children of rebel returnees and Christian farmers in poverty engaged in farming entrepreneurship and provided with employment opportunities at the local government units. The OTP helped farmers save on transportation and marketing costs while ensuring fair prices for their farm products.

Most importantly, rebel returnees are proud of being farmers and find happiness and enjoyment in managing their farms, livestock, and fishpond. Livelihood is not just about a means to survival but also about providing resources with which people can enhance and enjoy their lives (Morse & Mc Namara, 2013). The program allows the rebel returnees to become productive, boosts their sense of personal well-being, and gives them a sense of purpose in life. Thus, the technology, practices, and systems being adopted by the farmers or

they are made to adopt automatically influence their lives, happiness, and well-being (Hosrtkotle-Wessler, 1999) cited in Mendoza (2004).

Environmental Aspect

Rebel returnees have adopted and implemented effective, sustainable agriculture practices, including crop diversification, crop rotation, planting of nitrogen-fixing plants, contouring, integrated pest management, and using indigenous knowledge systems. Water management is implemented through contouring, achieved by planting pineapples, which effectively minimizes soil erosion and water run-off. These practices helped in preventing land degradation and promoting a healthy environment. Experiences and observations of farmer rebel returnees show that the pest and disease management options in organic farming heavily depend on preventive measures rather than curative practices, which are based on ecologically safer management methods (Haldhar et al., 2017) cited in Kumar et al. (2020). Rotating crops in diverse and complex patterns is one of the oldest agronomic approaches used by farmers to control nutrient and water balances, weed, pest, and disease.

Conclusions

This study showed the nexus between conflict, food security, sustainable livelihood, peace, and development. Poverty, hunger, food insecurity, inequalities, or unequal distribution of income, land, and other material goods were the causes of the previous conflict in Kauswagan and neighboring communities in Lanao del Norte, Philippines. Moreover, the lack of support from local government units, non-government organizations, and the private sectors in addressing human and food insecurity protracted conflict in the communities. So, effective institutions with courageous leadership must address the root causes of conflict. Thus, building and sustaining peace through good governance, food security, and sustainable livelihood (UCLG Peace Prize, 2021).

This study presents case studies reflecting the transformative power of agriculture in war-torn communities. It offers a broader perspective of development that in establishing an economically viable farming system, attitudes and mindsets can be changed even among individuals who lead a life of rebellion. Thus, the objective of development is not merely to increase incomes or improve poverty indicators but also to expand people's fundamental freedoms (Dongier et al., 2018).

The *From Arms to Farms* program has transformed rebel returnees into self-reliant and resilient farmer entrepreneurs. The program has influenced farmers' attitudes toward land utilization, environmental awareness and protection, and the minimization of nonrenewable resource consumption by adopting and implementing sustainable agriculture practices. Food security and improved rural livelihoods in the communities contributed to mitigating and preventing conflicts and securing sustainable peace and development.

In general, the *From Arms to Farms* program is geared towards the achievement primarily of SDG 1 (End poverty in all its forms) and SDG 2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced inequality), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) as preconditions and mechanisms to ensure peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) and sustainable communities (SDG 11).

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