



Photo by Alex Baluyut

In war-torn areas, it is the children who are usually the victims and are even recruited to become soldiers. In the conflict areas of Cotabato, the local government has taken a more positive approach by recruiting and forming children to become peace advocates who can lead the way to resolving the armed conflict.

The Cotabato provincial government realized that the armed conflict in the region is partly rooted in the underlying distrust between the three peoples of Mindanao—the indigenous people, the Moro people and the Christian settlers. And that it would be a far more difficult task to change the perception of the adults who have already made up their minds than to convince the children who are more open to new ideas.

Thus, in August of 2003, the provincial government of Cotabato began implementing its Children First Program (CFP). The objective of the CFP is to promote

camaraderie among the Moro, IP and Christian youth by having them share their experiences and aspirations. The program also seeks to develop confidence and trust among the youth and encourage them to actively campaign for peace in their respective communities. Lastly, the program provides avenues for self improvement through formal and technical education.

The CFP has many components but the Children of Peace (COP) is its banner program, which is designed to create better and long-lasting ties between the youth in the province. Essentially, the COP program brings the youth from the tri-peoples of Cotabato together at a four to seven-day workshop

in a learning, sharing and living environment to make them understand and appreciate each other's culture and belief systems. Among the topics they discuss include Peace Building, Understanding the Muslim, Christian and IP faith and children's rights.

By encouraging the children to share, learn, understand and appreciate each other's cultures and beliefs, the program hopes to correct misconceptions and develop better relationships. The idea is to enable the young to grow and learn to live together in peace and harmony. Since 2003, six batches of children, or a total of 239 children, have participated in the program. Some of them

Cotabato Province

Children of Peace

became scholars of the provincial government and seven have already graduated from various colleges and universities. The COP graduates are organized in a way that encourages them to maintain ties and to work for peace in their communities. In time, a critical mass of peace advocates would hopefully form in their respective areas.

The other components of the CFP—*Study Now, Pay Later Plan*; *Balik Eskwela*; *Books for Peace*; *OSY Skills Training*; *Oral Hygiene*; and *Sanitation*; and *Tele Eskwela*—help enhance the children’s education. The *Pasko Alay sa mga Bata* program enables the indigent children to enjoy Christmas.

With the *Study Now, Pay Later Plan*, deserving students were able to get an education. A total of 2,380 scholars have been supported by the Provincial Government since 2003. A total of 1,235 have graduated and a total of 1000 students are currently enrolled in various colleges and universities in Cotabato Province. Meanwhile, the *Skills Training* enabled the out-of-school youth to learn livelihood skills. Twenty out-of-school youth were given technical scholarships in cooperation with TESDA. These young people now have the means to earn livelihood through the skills they have learned.

The Provincial Government has limited resources but it managed to enlist the help of other institutions and agencies like the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the ABS-CBN Foundation, Inc. These agencies donated educational materials such as books and school supplies as well as equipment like television sets


and VHS players. A total of 75 schools received the packages of technology which proved very helpful in teaching math and science concepts. An assessment of the *Tele Eskwela* program showed that participating pupils achieved scores which were 10 to 15 percent higher than those who did not. The program also promoted higher pupil-teacher interaction in class.

In the *Books for Peace* component program, a total of 101 schools were able to access books from the *Books for the Barrios, Inc.*, an NGO based in the United States. The creation of the mini-libraries in the recipient schools developed the students’ love for reading, increased their reading abilities and widened their horizons.

Every year, the Provincial Government celebrates Christmas day with the institutionalization of the *Pasko Alay sa mga Bata*. With the assistance of the Provincial Department of Social Welfare and Development, indigent children from selected barangays are gathered for the Christmas celebration. A simple party and

gift giving is conducted for the children.

The CFP was borne out of the ardent desire to find a strategic end to the festering conflict plaguing the province of Cotabato. It is premised on the belief that by changing paradigms among the young, peace might become attainable in Mindanao. When the children’s perceptions of each other change, they might learn to live more peacefully together. And when the young are better educated, they also have more opportunities to become more productive and are more likely to pursue a life of peace and prosperity.

The program is simple, sustainable and highly replicable in many areas of Mindanao. Among the mechanisms that make it sustainable are the following: the institutionalization of an office that handles the planning, implementation, and assessment of the projects under the program; the passing of the Children’s Code, an ordinance that spells out programs that the young need for their development and protection; the cooperation of institutions whose contributions ensure that the program will go beyond any leadership in the Provincial Government; and continued linkages with development partners from various sectors who aim to ensure the continuity of the program. 

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