

Children in the Aftermath of Local Conflict in Lanao del Norte

Maria Teresa Sharon C. Linog
Sulpecia L. Ponce

Introduction

Countries with ongoing conflict or those which experienced a long drawn out war are beset with social problems and economic slowdown. Armed conflict disrupts family life and governance. Local conflict adversely affects the provision of health services, schooling, and public utilities in the immediate vicinity. Relationships among residents are fractured, and existing power structure loses or diminishes its authority.

Several studies worldwide have documented the effects of armed conflict on the communities where they occur. It seems, however, that the direct consequences of war in terms of deaths, injuries, and damage to physical infrastructures prove to be much easier to measure than the long-term impact of exposure to violence on people's mental health. The prevalence of mental health problems can rise significantly after natural disasters and conflict (Whiteford, 2005).

Marcelino, et al. (2000) recorded that since 1986, poverty, human rights violations, evacuations, and terrorism, among others, affected mostly children eight years old and below. A body of literature on children and war documented the travails the young suffer — the trauma and physical violence they experienced. In particular, it is indicated that conflict implicates their ability to learn in school and threatens their chances for long-term psychosocial stability (Machel, 1996).

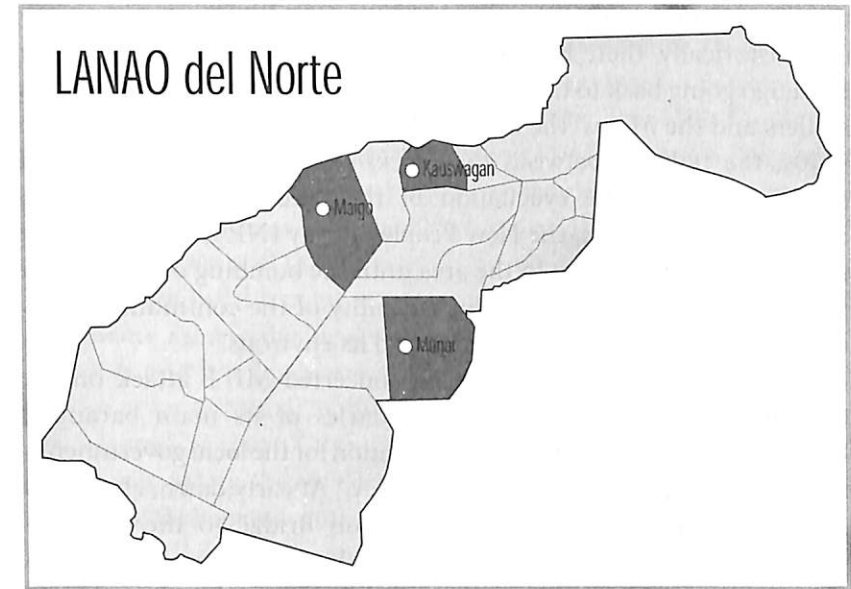
The impact of conflict on children's mental health, however, has yet to be fully explored. The way parents, stakeholders, and government respond to conflict situation varies. In like manner, children's response, coping, and vulnerability to sustain long-term psychological debilitation as a result of exposure to violence also vary as a function of their age and emotional dependence on adults.

Republic Act 7610 stipulates statutory provisions that protect children during situations of armed conflict. Since 2000, however, the sporadic outbreaks of armed encounters in Lanao del Norte did not spare the children who made up most of the internally displaced persons (IDPs). The conflict episodes stretched over a period of time, such that a particular community could be periodically displaced when the tide of battle shifted near. At the height of the community crisis, parents may remain unaware of the extent of the adverse impact of such an experience on the psychosocial well-being of children. Conflict-related stress symptoms take longer to manifest and require proper diagnosis by mental health experts. They vary across children population and may range from fear, aggression, loss of self-esteem, and mental ill health. Once the mental health condition of the children is impaired, their social and economic potentials are also adversely affected (Balita, 2005).

This paper examines the impact of conflict on the mental health condition of Lanao del Norte children who experienced the 2000 All-Out War. This study was done five years after to document what the children remember of their experiences during and immediately after that event and examine signs and symptoms of physical, cognitive, psychological, and social disturbance among children before and shortly after their home communities were embroiled in armed conflict.

Research Setting

From among three towns in Lanao del Norte that had been heavily affected by the 2000 All-Out War, a barangay each was randomly chosen. These are the barangays of Poblacion in Kauswagan, Poblacion in Maigo, and Matampay in Munai.



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Barangay Poblacion, Kauswagan

On 17 March 2000, more than 300 civilian residents including children were held hostage by Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) elements at the Kauswagan town hall but were safely rescued by the military on the same day. Four days later, President Joseph Estrada came down to Kauswagan and declared an All-Out War in Lanao del Norte, sending government troops in pursuit of the Muslim rebels. The massive firefights that ensued between the military and the MILF elements dragged on for more than a month.

Kauswagan residents remember that the MILF invasion of the Poblacion area left civilian and military casualties, as well as unaccounted deaths among the attackers. The locals evacuated in haste using the sea routes as MILF roadblocks sprung up in the eastern and western boundaries of the Poblacion. Some fleeing civilians experienced being shot at or pursued by MILF elements. Only a few people were left in town a day after the incident. Vital community functions were temporarily suspended during the attack but resumed operations soon after the Philippine Marines secured the area.

Barangay Poblacion, Maigo

Historically, there had been recurring incidents of local conflict in Maigo going back to the skirmishes in the 1950s between Christian settlers and the *Moros*¹ the former alleged to be cattle rustlers. In the 1970s, the fighting between the *Blackshirts*² and the *Ilaga*³ would sometimes cause the evacuation of the predominantly Maranao residents. In the 1980s, the New People's Army (NPA) emerged to be a growing security threat in the area until the bombing of its camp in Barangay Maliwanang ended the capability of the communist rebels to mount major offensives in Maigo and its environs.

It is believed in Maigo that the concerted MILF attack on the eastern, western, and southern boundaries of its main barangay, Poblacion, on 24 April 2003 was in retaliation for the local government's refusal to pay the MILF protection money.⁴ At early dawn, about 300 MILF guerilla troops invaded Barongison Bridge to the east and strafed a Super 5 commuter bus, killing three of its passengers and wounding others. At around the same time, another MILF band entered Barangay Kulasihan, Kolambogan, the eastern boundary of Maigo, and killed around ten passengers on board a fish carrier. More MILF invading troops came through Purok 2 and Purok 4.

When the marauding MILF came, the civilians fled to the shorelines to the north. However, only a few were able to get across by pumpboat to Ozamiz City that day. By nightfall, the stranded populace was directed to the schoolhouses that the Department of Health (DOH) and the Municipal Planning and Development Office (MPDO) had turned into evacuation centers. Responding troops sent in by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) engaged the raiding party in firefights to drive them out. While the MILF withdrew the very same day, the people feared that these forces could come back any time. Many stayed for some time in the evacuation centers and only visited their homes during the day in order to feed their livestock.

Barangay Matampay, Munai

Matampay was an MILF-influenced barangay that, until the 2000 All-Out War, was perceived even by neighboring barangays to rely on the MILF elements for social control and protection. In fact, people in Lanao had the impression that Matampay residents were MILF members also.

Matampay was hit by conflict in the summer of 2000 and again in 2003, but it was the former that caused more damage and displacement

because of its length and intensity. The 2000 All-Out War brought the fleeing MILF bands and the pursuing government troops into the area. Days later, government troops mounted operations to capture the 102nd Base Command camp of the Northern Mindanao Front, Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (NMF, BIAF) in Barangay Inudaran.⁵ The eventual fall of this camp would send scattered bands of MILF troops scampering all over Munai and to the adjoining towns, with the soldiers still in hot pursuit.

Even before the combatants caught up with each other in the area, many among the local residents had started to evacuate. As the firefights and bombings escalated, the rest fled to the forest and the interior areas of Munai, with some eventually finding refuge in Lanao del Sur and Marawi City, until no civilian was left in Matampay. Running to safety, the residents could hear the explosions and gunfire. They saw helicopter gunships and some fighter planes dropping bombs at MILF targets who had also hidden in the forests.

It was almost a year before the residents started to trickle back to Matampay. War had ravaged their homes, and some of them chose to let the ruins stand. Government postconflict rehabilitation efforts provided for core shelters that the returnees could use as they slowly tried to rebuild their community life. In 2003, however, the town again got caught in renewed armed conflict between the MILF and the government troops, causing the destruction this time of the school building and the water system, among others. The people had to evacuate yet again.

In late 2005 when this study was initiated, the Matampay population stood at thirty percent of the pre-2000 census figures. A company of the Philippine Marines secured the area and various nongovernment organizations (NGOs) were providing development assistance such as postharvest facilities, a community water system, and a *Madrasah* school to help the barangay get back on its feet.

The Children

Household interviews in the three barangays were necessary to establish how many among the children there had experienced the 2000 All-Out War. Those who qualified were screened as to their capacity to recall the events during the height of the conflict. The older ones were invited to take part in focus group discussions (FGDs) while the younger ones were individually interviewed.⁶ The FGDs



This photo of young children at an evacuation center was taken in 2000 by the late Gene Boyd Lumawag. Photo courtesy of Bobby Timonera

and interviews in Kauswagan and Maigo were done in Cebuano while Tagalog was used with the Maranao⁷ children in Munai.

Thirty-seven children were the data sources for this study. Sixteen were individually interviewed⁸ while twenty-one took part in the three FGDs⁹ that were respectively conducted in each study site. Their mean age at ten indicated that they experienced the armed conflict in these communities when they were around five years old.¹⁰ Those who came from Munai were all Maranao, while the Kauswagan and Maigo respondents were all Christians.

Close to sixty percent were still in the primary grades. There were four among them who were in high school while the rest were in the elementary grades. All of them had suffered interruption in their schooling.¹¹

More than half of the children were either born first or second¹² in a brood of three or four in an extended family that had an average household size of 6.4.¹³ Farming is averred to be the main source of family income. The Kauswagan and Maigo children disclosed that their parents had gone to college. The Munai respondents, on the other hand, could not give information on the educational experience of their parents.¹⁴

Children's Memory of Experiences before Conflict

In order to establish whether there were significant changes in the behavior of the children after the conflict, there was a need to determine certain benchmark information of their mental status before the conflict. Four indicators were used: physical, cognitive, social, and psychological experiences or conditions.

Prior to armed conflict, the children report some physical disturbances. Weight loss due to undernourishment was reported by three. Another three reported enuresis.¹⁵ Other physical disturbances reported were shakiness or tremors, shortness of breath, and occasional headache or lightheadedness, which could be attributed to the body's response to environmental changes, work or play, and nutritional deficiency. The manifestations of physical stress that surfaced were indicated to stem from malnutrition, developmental stages, and social activities such as play that required strenuous physical movement.

Two children reported to have short attention span. One admitted having had learning difficulties. No other observations about difficulties in cognitive functioning could be recalled.

In terms of social functioning, five children disclosed some discipline and relational issues. Four said they got in trouble at home for refusing to do household chores or to go to school. Another allegedly got into playground fights with some frequency.

The most prevalent psychological reactions reported by the children include a dislike of war toys and fear of strangers. There were occasional cases of nightmares, bouts of irritability, and transitory sadness.

When asked about their perception of the soldiers before the 2000 conflict, the Christian children had varied answers. Some had feared the soldiers, others saw them as protectors, while others had not known soldiers prior to the conflict. The Maranao children, on the other hand, either had no prior knowledge of the soldier or saw him as a threat to the family or the community.

Mahadlok ko ug sundalo basin patyon - abi nako mamatay ug tao. (I was afraid of soldiers because I thought they kill people).

- Christian male, 10

Sa pagkakita nako nahadlok ko kay nagbuto-buto man ilang mga pusil. (When I saw them, I was scared because their guns made a loud noise).

- Christian female, 11

Sa una sab wala man ko nakakita sa armadong tawo. (I had never seen an armed man before).

- Christian male, 9

Adto na pagkagiyera ayha ko nakakita nag marcha sa dalan, daghan kayo. (It was only when the conflict broke out that I saw many of them marching down the streets).

- Christian male, 12

Motabang sa atoa ug motabang sa mga tawo. (They help us and others, too).

- Christian female, 10

Wala lang, maglakaw-lakaw ra mi, dili ko mahadlok kay dili man manghilabot. (We did not mind them. We roamed around without fear because they did not touch us).

- Christian female, 9

Wala akong nakikita na sundalo. MI ra ang palaging nakikita. (I had not seen a soldier but I frequently saw the MILF).

- Muslim male, 11

Hindi pa ako nakakita ng sundalo, pero nakadungog nako nga nay sundalo... (I had not seen a soldier, but I heard about them).

- Muslim female, 10

Natatakot baka barilin. Kasi si Papa ko kasama niya si Bravo. (I was afraid they would shoot. Because my father is with Bravo).

- Muslim male, 13

Kasi masasama silang mga tao, ang mga sundalo. (Because the soldiers are bad people).

- Muslim female, 14



The evacuees inside a schoolhouse in Maigo that was turned into an evacuation center in 2003. Photo by Bobby Timonera

Because it was normal for them to see the MILF elements in their neighborhood, the Munai children did not fear the MILF, unlike the children from Kauswagan and Maigo who disclosed some stereotypes they held about the MILF, as below:

Hindi ako matakot sa MI kasi pareha kami Muslim kahit may baril dala nila (I am not afraid of the MILF because they are Muslims like us even though they carry guns).

- Muslim male, 10

MI makahadlok kay mahadlok man ta mamatay, mamatay na ug bata. Usahay daw mangita ug tigulang, ilang kan-on, ingon akong uncle. (I was afraid of the MILF because I fear being killed. They kill children. My uncle said they sometimes catch old people and eat them).

- Christian male, 11

When they were asked to complete a sentence about their life prior to the conflict, all of them said that they had been happy (*malipayon*). Most of them claimed that their days were spent playing with friends, doing domestic chores, and studying. Across the study sites, the trend for remembering positive experiences of their joys, family obligations and socialization with peer groups and family members showed up.

The Lanao children learned to do household chores early in life as family members had taught them to clean house, cook, wash clothes and dishes, and care for their younger siblings. A respondent described his morning routine thus,

Pagmata sa buntag, maligo ug magkabo dayon (Upon waking in the morning, I took a bath and immediately fetched water).

- Christian male, 11

Children also devoted time to their studies in and out of the classroom, making space for class-related reviewing at home or at play. According to them, *magtuon mi* (we studied) and *praktis ug basa, dula ra talagsa* (practiced reading, sometimes played).

In the coastal areas where there was electricity, the respondents watched television during free time. In the hinterlands that had yet to have electricity, the younger children played house or hide-and-seek, Chinese garter or marbles, or watched older children play ballgames. Younger children had more time to play because they were not given many domestic responsibilities. They also liked strolling around the neighborhood with their friends. However, there were also children who reported to have been restricted by parents even before conflict came to the community.



Children prepare corn for cooking at an evacuation center in Maigo. Photo by Bobby Timonera

Ako mas gusto maglaro pero ayaw ni Mama. (I would like to play but Mother would not allow it).

- Christian male, 9

Children's Memory of Experiences during Conflict Episodes

Conflict touched the two Christian barangays in 2000 while Barangay Matampay was visited by fierce fighting twice — in 2000 and 2003. In Kauswagan, children remember the panic, confusion, uncertainty, fear, and hardships that accompanied the invasion of their barangay by what they initially believed to be combat-ready government soldiers:

Adto bang paggubot namakwit unta mi, ingon man sila nga sundalo daw na nag-hike sa kalsada. Ana sila sundalo daw kay nagsuot man ang uban ug Army nga sinina. Ang uban pag-agi sa kalsada miingon man nga 'hala, mga MI na!' Lumba mi panagan. Ang uban nangambak na lang sa pangpang. Dinaganay na mi ato (When conflict came, we were set to evacuate, but someone said those were actually soldiers there on the streets. They said they must be soldiers because some were in Army garb. Then others who saw them said they were MILF. We ran for our lives then. Others jumped off the cliff. We raced each other to get away.)

- Christian female, 10

The children rushed with their families to the Kauswagan shoreline as it provided the only way to evade the MILF. Some hid where they could along the beach while others went down into the water.

Baybay mi gipaingon. Naay buto-buto, nanago mi sa baybay. Daghang mga tawo. (We went to the shore. There were explosions, and we hid. There were many people).

- Christian female, 11

Dinhi ra sa ilalom sa silong nanago mi... (We hid under our house).

- Christian male, 10

Palutaw-lutaw ra man mi sa dagat (We just floated in the sea).

- Christian male, 9

They remember that their elders made frantic attempts to secure sea transport to bring the families to safety across the water. Those who were successful had to put up with the discomfort and haste.

Nibalik mi sab sa pantalan naghulat mi naay modunggo nga lantsa (We went back to the wharf to wait for a boat.)

- Christian male, 12

Akong manghod hapit mahulog kay giitsa sa barko para makasakay. Gidala mi sa Iligan. (My younger sibling almost fell into the water when they threw her onboard. The boat brought us to Iligan.)

- Christian female, 11

Some respondents narrated their experience of being captured by the MILF:

Nangadto mi sa baybay kay nakit-an man mi sa MI, di gi-hostage mi, tulo mi, kauban nako akong ig-agaw, ug igsoon. Naa pod akong uncle... gidala mi sa auditorium (We were heading to the shore when the MILF saw us. There were three of us — my sister and my cousin. My uncle was also there. They brought us to the auditorium).

- Christian male, 12

...Nitawag man sila ug pump boat, duha ka buok. Dayon wa kaabot unya naa may nagsumbong sa MI nga naa ra mi didto, miapas ang MI didto mao tong nadakpan mi. Gi-hostage mi duha ka oras. Wala mi gibuhian. Nangabot na man dayon ang mga Marines. Naggubutay na dayon sa kilid sa auditorium. (We were waiting there for two pumpboats that did not come. Someone tipped off the MILF that we were there. They came to take us and held us hostage for two hours.¹⁶ They would not let us go. The Marines arrived and engaged them in a firefight beside the auditorium).

- Christian female, 10

In Puroks 2 and 4, which one group of the attacking MILF elements breached to get to Poblacion, the children could still vividly recall the early morning events of 24 April 2003. Two respondents remember that they were preparing breakfast when the armed men came.

Gubot kaayo sa nga tanan ang nangabot ang MI. 'Dagan, diri ang mga MI.' Una tong nanagan mi. Diri tong naglung-ag ko, nagpalit ko

ug bugas, pagkahuman, nagbuto-buto man to, nanagan mi paingon sa dagat... (It was most confusing when the MI came. 'Run, the MILF are here.' I ran back here for what we were cooking. I had bought rice and was cooking. Then the explosions. We ran to down to the beach...)

- Christian male, 12

Primero nagbuto-buto, pag-abre ni Mama sa bintana nakita namo ang mga armado nga tawo. Dayon nanagan mi ug gidala luto ra gisulod sa kaldero, nanagan dayon ilang Benitez among silingan. Dayon, nanagan sa baybay (First, there were explosions. When my Mother opened the window, we saw armed men. We ran over to our neighbor Benitez with our pot of rice. We then ran towards the shore).

- Christian male, 9

Puroks 2 and 4 are about a kilometer from the main streets of Poblacion. The arrival of the MILF caught the people by surprise. While some immediately scampered, others hid indoors hoping that the armed men were only passing by. However, many who stayed home finally decided hours later to follow their neighbors to safety.

Nanagan mi sa sulod, nanghapa mi ug nagtago. (We rushed home and stayed down on the floor).

- Christian male, 1

Nagtabon sa akong habol ug nag pray ko sa God para wala na gubot (I hid under the blanket and prayed to God to stop the violence).

- Christian female, 8

"Nanago mi kay naigo na ang balay pag-ayo. Maayo gani semento (We hid because our house was heavily strafed. Good thing it was made of cement)."

- Christian male, 10

"Nanagan ang mga tawo ug nanago dayon mi sa silingan" (People were running and we hid at the neighbors').

- Christian male, 9

In the rush to get out of harm's way, the children report that "Napiangan akong duha ka uncle kay niambak sa bintana (My two uncles were injured because they jumped out of the window)."

- Christian male, 10

"Walay naigo, nasamad ra akong Lolo kay naipit sa alambre (Nobody got hit, but Grandfather tangled with a mesh of wires)."

- Christian female, 9

Fear was a constant companion as the families fled their homes.

"...Nagkurog ko sa kahadiok sa buto-buto. Sa una, dili ko gakurog-kurog. Ang mga kuya, nagkurog-kurog sab ug nanagan. Ako naghilak. (I trembled in fear of the explosions. I never did that before. My elder brothers trembled and ran. I cried)."

- Christian female, 10

Nahadlokko. Walay among pamahaw, mangape unta mi adto. Nabiyaan namo. Wala ra pod nabantayan kung gigutom ko kay nahadlok ko. (I was afraid. We hadn't eaten. We were about to have coffee when we had to go. I forgot about being hungry since I was so afraid).

- Christian male, 11

It was while waiting to be evacuated from the shorelines that people thought of the need to eat. Some collected shellfish (*nanginhas mi didto*) or hastily prepared whatever there was (*nagkaon ug luto si Mamang*). A child remembers that

"...Namatay akong igsoon ug na shock ko kay wala man koy kaon (...My brother died and I was in shock because of hunger).

- Christian female, 10

The people who were not able to find a boat to take them to safety finally walked along the coastline to get to the schoolhouse where relief agencies hastily set up operations as government troops chased the MILF raiders out of the barangay. The children recalled that their families stayed in the evacuation center for some time. During the day, they retraced the beach trail back to their homes to take care of livestock.

"Walo ka adlaw sa eskwelahan sa kinder gauli mi ug buntag kay manlawog sa baboy pagkahuman mamalik dayon mi sa eskwelahan

sa baybay. (We stayed eight days at the kindergarten school. We only went home to feed the pigs then we hurried back to the school)."

- Christian male, 12

For the Matampay children, on the other hand, the path to safety was a long trek through the forest with their families as the violent clashes drew nearer their barangay. They witnessed how their parents trembled in fear as they hurriedly packed and moved out. The children were frightened.

"Sumama ako nagbakwit, naglakad tatlong araw (I joined the evacuation, walking for three days)."

- Muslim male, 11

"...Natakot si mama, nagkurog. Nahadlok din si papa. Natakot silang lahat (Mother trembled in fear. Father was also afraid. They were all afraid)."

- Muslim female, 11

"Natatakot ako baka babarilin kami (I was afraid they would shoot us)."

- Muslim male, 10

"...Bakwit sa Marawi, naglalakad...natakot, napagod (We walked to Marawi,¹⁷ frightened and tired)."

- Muslim male, 12

The Matampay evacuees had time to hastily put things together and set out before the fighting came to their neighborhood. They left with bundles of clothes, some utensils, live animals, and food provisions. While most of them walked, some were able to find transport. The children provide snatches of what they remember of the experience:

"Sumakay kami ng truck dito. Marami kaming nagbakwit at nahirapan akong sumakay kasi masyadong maraming tao. (We rode a truck. It was too crowded and uncomfortable)."

- Muslim female, 10

"Nagbakwit mi alas-siete ng gabi (We moved out at seven in the evening)."

- Muslim male, 10

Those who walked through the forest remember that

"Malamig doon, nagkasakit mga kapatid ko (It was cold. My siblings got sick)."

- Muslim male, 10

"May nakita kaming bahay, doon kami natulog (We came upon a house. We slept there)."

- Muslim female, 10

In the three barangays, the children recall that in the frantic haste of setting out, *nabasa ang sinina namo* (our clothes got wet) and that *mga bata nangalopitan ug napiang tungod sa pagdinaganay sa tawo* (some children were crushed and hurt in the stampede). Asked about what they were thinking as they left their homes, some of them said,

Nahadlok ko ug pusilon... Namatyan ko ug duha ka uncle nag Marines... Nahadlok ko nga wala pa mi kasakay unyag masapnan mi sa MI. (I was afraid to be shot. Two of my uncles in the Marines had died... I was afraid the MILF would come before we could ride out).

- Christian male, 12

Nahadlok ko sa pusil (I feared the guns).

- Christian female, 10

Nahadlok, nidagan, nakulbaan kay girakrakan (I was frightened, I ran, terrified because we were fired upon).

- Christian male, 11

People featured in the memories of the children of the conflict in the community, most notably in the frantic rush to safety. Some of them reported to have witnessed neighbors and combatants getting killed or wounded and seeing a family member succumb to overwhelming panic. They also saw others suffer hunger or succumbing to physical injury or sickness. When asked what they remember of children their age, they described children who were frightened, hungry, alone, and crying. They also told about children who had to stay floating in the water for hours or who were separated from their friends during the evacuation, as well as children who died.

Asked what they found hard to forget about their conflict experience, they referred to the hardships and deprivations suffered during evacuation, exposure to violence and destructive force of weapons, and being at the mercy of combatants.

Ilang oras kaming naglakad, yong pagkain sa kalsada (We walked long hours. We ate on the road).

- Muslim male, 10

Ang gubot, nay gi-hostage, naay gipangdakop sa mga MI nga mga tawo (The war, hostage, the ones who were taken by the MILF).

- Christian male, 11

Katong hapit mi maigo gitirahan sa MI (When we were shot and almost hit by the MILF).

- Christian male, 9

Nanagan mi, naggubot dayon, nag-ulan ug bala (We ran, war began, and the bullets rained).

- Christian male, 10

Kadtong gibombahan ang tulay sa Barongison, ang helicopter morag nangiti, naa didto among paryente, naguol ko basin namatyan sila (When the helicopter bombed the Barongison bridge, it looked like a bird dropping waste matter in flight. We feared for our relatives living near the place as they might be killed).

- Christian female, 9

Ang dili nako malimtan kay kadtong buto-buto, mahadlok ko hangtud karon kon makabati ko ug buto-buto magkulba-kulba (I could not forget the explosions. Until now, when something explodes I get nervous).

- Christian male, 10

Mga MI ug mga sundalo ug tanke (The MILF and soldiers and the tanks).

- Christian female, 8

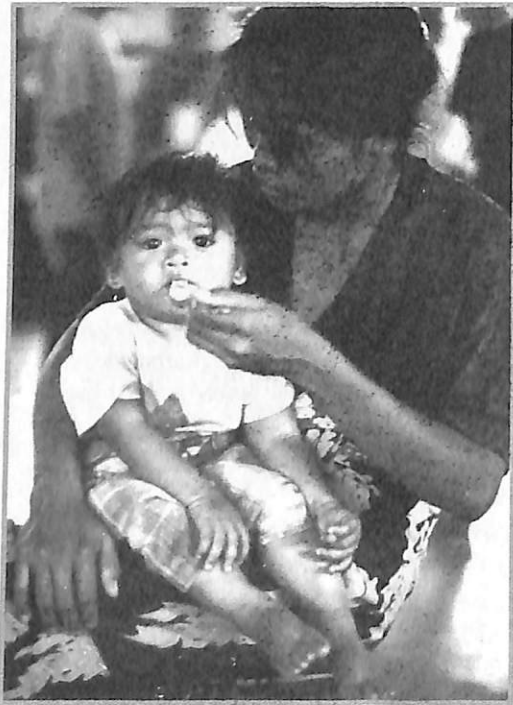
Yung bomba inihulog ng helicopter (The bomb was dropped from the helicopter).

- Muslim male, 10

Children's Memory of Experiences Immediately after Conflict

In Kauswagan where the sudden and intense armed encounters caught everyone by surprise with helicopters dropping bombs, the combatants shooting each other in the streets, and some civilians getting caught in the crossfire, some families felt it safe to return home the day after the attackers were chased out. Their neighbors slowly trickled back in the days after. Still, it was evident that normalcy took a long time coming, and the children noticed that they continued to suffer from postconflict reactions. One of them reported that his tremors recurred on and off for about a week. In addition, he and his siblings developed boils that would remain for two months despite antibiotics.

Awake or asleep, the continuing high security situation in Kauswagan was registered by the other respondents also. Some of them reported that there were times when they were roused at night by the paramilitary elements and told to evacuate again because of impending MILF attacks.



A mother feeds her toddler during the 2000 evacuation in Kauswagan. Photo by Bobby Timonera

Dili na kaayo ko laagan. Maniid ko sa buto (I did not venture out much. I kept my ears open for the sound of gunfire).

- Christian female, 10

Mahadlok ko mobalik ang rebelde (I feared the rebels might come back).

- Christian male, 8

Ate gadamgo ug dautan, gipatay ang papa, pukawon gayawyaw.
(My elder sister dreamt that our father was killed. When roused she would still be mumbling).

- Christian male, 11

On the other hand, the children in Maigo and Matampay reported to have experienced less postconflict disturbance than the Kauswagan respondents. They expressed that they were *nalipay pagkahuman sa kagubot* (happy when the war had ended) because *wala nay buto* (there were no more explosions).

It is noted that the pursuit operations in Maigo and Munai featured less intense firefights than what was experienced in Kauswagan. Most of the Maigo locals were not there any more when the combatants came and clashed in their barangays. In Munai, the residents actually had time to assemble the things they needed to take with them. They mostly remember what they saw and heard from afar and seeing the damage to their homes only upon their return weeks or months later.

Some reported changes in the physical, psychological, cognitive, and social experiences of the children in the period immediately following the conflict were gotten. Overall, the children respondents reported an increased incidence of physical disturbances occurring after the conflict. Most common symptoms noted include weight loss/loss of appetite, shakiness/tremors, fatigue/exhaustion, spontaneous crying, headache/lightheadedness, nausea, and vomiting. This physical observation was reportedly most pronounced in Kauswagan where armed violence was more intense and Munai where families suffered longer periods of displacement during the conflict. The children attributed their loss of appetite to lack of food and the lingering fear they could not shake off. Half of the children reported to have lost weight in the week after the violence in their respective communities. They claim that their appetite was adversely affected by their apprehension and fear of gunfire and explosions. Those in the evacuation centers remember that the food rations were unappetizing and repetitive.

Wala may gana, dili ko gagutman kay sige man kulbaan (I wasn't hungry because I always felt nervous).

- Christian male, 8

Human sa pagbuto-buto ginagmay ang pagkaon tungod kay nahadlok, ug naniwang (After the explosions, I barely ate because I felt tense, and I lost weight).

- Muslim female, 10

Dili ko ganahan kay nabusog na — sa kahadlok (I had no appetite because I was already full — of fear).

- Christian female, 9

Memory Associations of War Experience

As a sort of conflict-related psychological and emotional inventory, the children were shown pictures of objects or persons to prime their memory of their exposure to similar experiences and provide a glimpse into both their resolved and unresolved conflict-related stress. It was theorized that their responses would be reflective of the status of their psychological and emotional health. In particular, pictures containing military bomber plane/helicopter, armored car, and armed soldiers were presented to the children respondents. Their responses are discussed below.

The majority of children articulated fear of the helicopter. Most had logical attributions for their apprehensions, to include the possibility of their homes being hit by bombs (*morag bombahan among balay*) or burned down (*masunog ang mga balay ug mabungkag*). The children also associated the helicopter with the presence of the MILF nearby (*basin naay mobalik nga MI*) and the possibility of violent encounters where they might get caught in the crossfire (*basin maggira ba, ma crossfire*). Irrational fears characteristic of the young mind were also evoked, such as the fear of being made cannon fodder (*mahadlok ko basin ibala ko ana*).

Some respondents associated the helicopter with war casualties among government troops (*daghang namatay nga sundalo panahon sa gubot*) that had to be transported (*maghakot sa patay nga sundalo*). Helicopters also brought to mind soldiers and war (*naay sundalo, naay gubot*) and assistance to evacuees.

The Christian respondents viewed the armored vehicle in an ambivalent manner. There were those who associated it with the Marines who rescued them from the MILF hostage takers during the conflict. Some children said the tank was a harbinger of war, while others said that its coming signaled the restoration of peace.

Those who associated the armored car with fear pointed to its presence during critical security conditions (*mahadlok basta naa ana delikado na*). It was a reminder that war may yet break out (*akong bation morag naa pa gihapoy gubot*), which inspired anxiety (*kahadlok*).

Among the Christian respondents, the picture of the armed soldiers was associated with fear due to possible violent confrontation between Muslims and Christians. However, the children were more afraid of the MILF troops than the soldiers (*dili ko mahadlok sa sundalo, MI mahadlok ko*). This is understandable since the children had identified the former as the attacking party in the 2000 conflict in the area. They saw soldiers as saviors (*sundalo tigluwas sa atoa*) who would kill the MILF (*sundalo patyon ang mga MI*).

The Muslim children identified the picture to be of a government soldier, not an MILF warrior. The picture evoked apprehensions of future violence (*baka magulo na naman*), fear of being shot at (*baka barilin*), or being killed (*basin patyon*). Three children, however, said it was only a picture (*piktyur lang iyan*).

There is a discernible difference in the manner these children view the warring armed groups. To most Muslim children, the presence of soldiers in their community evokes fear, especially of the soldiers' *timbang* (firearms). The Muslim respondents were generally apathetic to the government troops and sympathetic to the MILF. On the other hand, the Christian respondents generally had a positive attitude towards the military and a negative view of the MILF.

Of the three towns, it was only in Kauswagan where sleep disturbance among the respondents was noted immediately after conflict, especially among those who had been hostages by the attackers. Sleep, when it came, was interrupted by nightmares.

Taparon mi sa akong Mama tanan. Sa una dili. Usahay, gadamgo ko sa akong amiga nga naputlan ug ulo, mokalit ug mata (Mother stayed beside us as we slept. She did not do that before. Sometimes, I dreamt that my friend was beheaded. I would wake up suddenly).

- Christian male, 9

Sixteen percent of the respondents revealed that they were lethargic immediately after their evacuation experience. Aside from fatigue, normal activity was also hampered by the crowding in the evacuation centers. With the cement floors taken up for sleeping, the children did not have much room to move. Lack of food may have contributed also to the feeling of general malaise.

Natulog ra ko adto kay wala koy kaon (I slept because I had not eaten).

- Christian female, 10

Dili na kaayo ganahan modula. Dili nako malingaw ug luya ang lawas
(I did not feel like playing. It wasn't fun and my body felt weak).

- Christian male, 9

Twenty-one percent reported they felt alone.¹⁸ The separation from the peer group coupled with disruption of schooling may have exacerbated these children's loneliness.

Mingaw wala na kaayo'y mga bata (It was lonely with only few children around).

- Christian female, 11

Wala akong naramdaman na lungkot sa Marantao. Sa Ganasi, malungkot ako kasi wala akong kaibigan (I had not felt sad in Marantao. In Ganasi, I felt sad because I had no friend).

- Muslim female, 10

About eleven percent of the respondents mentioned being sad after the conflict and missing the company of their friends. There was little to eat and play time was curtailed. One child recalled being anxious that they might need to evacuate yet again any time. The rest of the children, on the other hand, reported having felt relieved that the crisis has ended.

Twenty-four percent of the Christian children respondents in Kauswagan and Maigo reported feeling apprehensive and fearful that the MILF attackers might stage another attack. In contrast, a Muslim child in Munai expressed fear that the soldiers might return to burn down their houses again.

For the Christian-dominated barangays, classes resumed one to two weeks after the violent clashes. Understandably, no child reported any significant changes in their studies. For the Muslim children, the Department of Education has yet to replace the schoolbuilding that was destroyed in 2003.¹⁹

Eleven percent of the Christian children disclosed that their recreational activities were adversely affected since the parents did not permit them to go out in case the MILF attacked again. For the Muslim respondents, on the other hand, it can be remembered that they did not immediately return to Matampay after they arrived in Marawi or Lanao del Sur. They report that away from home in the aftermath of conflict, they had time to play and enjoyed it very much.

Table 1 below summarizes the reported changes in the physical, psychological, cognitive, and social functioning of the children who had been exposed to violence and armed encounters in their communities of residence.

Data above seem to suggest that the children from communities who were exposed to intense, sudden, and longer duration of armed conflict tend to exhibit more physical stress. This is evident in the children of Poblacion, Kauswagan, who reported the most counts of physical symptoms. This is followed by Muslim children in Matampay, Munai, where massive destruction of their community coupled with postconflict occupation of the Marines in the area caused delay in their return to their homes. Comparatively, there was less incidence of physical stress among the children of Maigo whose exposure to armed conflict was shorter and less intense and where normal life commenced again almost immediately with their return to home and school.

Of their conflict experience, most of the Christian respondents maintained that there were several bad things that happened: many deaths (*daghan namatay*); mothers had difficulty in bringing sick children for treatment (*bata nga nagsakit dili madala sa Mama sa tambalan*); illness (*nagsakit*); evacuation (*managan*); unpeace (*nawala ang kalinaw*); economic difficulty (*nagkalisod*); crying; (*nanghilak*); and fear (*nangahadlok*).

Table 1. Children's experiences before and after conflict.

EXPERIENCES	KAUSWAGAN		MAIGO		MUNAI		Total	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
<i>a) Physical</i>								
Spontaneous crying		1		2		3		6
Bedwetting	1				2	3	3	6
Shakiness/tremors		6	1	2	1	2	2	10
Shortness of breath	1	1	1			1	2	4
Lightheadedness/ headache	2	2		1		2	2	7
Profuse sweating	1	1		1	1		2	4
Nausea/vomiting	1	1		2		1	4	5
No specific pain	1	1	1	2		2	4	6
Fatigue/ exhaustion		3		3	1	4	1	11
Indigestion	1	1		1	1		2	4
Hyperventilation	1	1			1	2	1	4
Weight loss/ loss of appetite	3	6		1	2	4	5	16
Total	12	24	3	15	9	22	23	85
<i>b) Cognitive</i>								
Learning difficulties		3	1	1		1	1	6
Short attention span		1	1	3	1	1	2	7

Stuttering		1							3	3
Inability to relate events		1					3		4	4
Poor school performance		3		1		1			5	5
Total		9	2	7	1	6	3	22	25	25
<i>c) Psychological</i>										
Sleeplessness		2				2			4	4
Nightmares	1		1	2		1	2		3	5
Aggression		1		3		2			6	6
Impatience/ irritability		2	1				1		2	3
Helplessness		2		2		1			5	5
Sadness		1			1	1	1		2	3
Fear in going to school		1		3		2			4	4
Fear of strangers	1	1		2	1	2	2	2	5	7
Dislike of war toys	4	2	1	1			5		5	10
Total	6	12	3	13	2	11	11	36	47	47
<i>d) Social</i>										
Refusal to work in the house	2	1		1			2		2	4
Refusal to recall events	1	2				3	1		5	6
Avoiding social activities		2				1			3	3
Refusal to go to school	1	1		2			1		3	4
Always in trouble at school	1	4				2	1		6	7
Total	5	10		3		6	5	19	24	24

The children clearly remember the evacuation rush that was characterized by much confusion and panic, the series of explosions/gunfire, the harrowing encounter with the armed elements especially the MILF that had even held hostage some of the Kauswagan respondents. These children told of their painful experiences of economic difficulties, food scarcity, deaths, displacement, confusion, and fear. For their part, the Muslim children expressed awareness that the war resulted in the destruction of their lives and livelihood (*nasira ang buhay/pangkabuhayan dito*), the feeling of pervasive fear among many of the respondents, of loneliness, and of the evacuation.

Adaptive strategies employed by children respondents under these stressful conditions were demonstrated to have been limited. Some of them implored divine intervention through prayer. Most of them coped by doing exactly as their parents told them — run, hide, and evacuate. Most of the families' initial response to armed conflict was to extricate the terrified children from the conflict situation. However, at those particular times when conflict visited the children's respective communities, the parents themselves were apparently ill-equipped to address the threat. They evidently lacked disaster preparedness and were not trained to assess and assist themselves and their children in order to cope more effectively. Still, the parents provided their children with their physical proximity as much as possible by holding them close and even sleeping beside them in the period immediately after the conflict episode. Fathers also gave instructions on what children should do the next time the community would be attacked. In recognition of the fragile postconflict security condition, some children in the Christian communities were forbidden to play outside the home.

Based on the counts gotten for postconflict mental health status indicators of the children, these children who reported changes in behavior may have needed intervention from experts immediately after their fateful exposure to community violence. While their families had evidently exerted effort to provide them emotional security, the adults were similarly challenged by the experience and did not have the expertise to diagnose and appropriately intervene to mitigate the children's difficulty. The children themselves were too young and too unknowing to recognize and act upon the threat to their mental health.

Five years after their exposure to armed conflict playing out in their areas of residence, some of the children had obviously recovered

from the physical, psychological, cognitive, and social effects of the experience. This may be because of their own inherent resilience, the adequate social support provided by family, or the young age at which they experienced it.

Notes

- 1 An epithet for Filipino Muslims.
- 2 An armed group of Muslim vigilantes who formed themselves in defense of Muslim territory. They were identified by their black shirts.
- 3 A Christian vigilante group formed to defend Ilonggo settler communities. ILAGA is purportedly an acronym for Ilonggo Landgrabbers Association.
- 4 Residents had registered the massing of MILF troops in the periphery of the poblacion a week before the attack.
- 5 The 102nd Base Command was then as now under Abdullah Macapaar, better known as Commander Bravo.
- 6 Extracting information from very young respondents demand strict adherence to ethical principles on informed consent done in the language they understand (Schenk and Williamson, 2005). Assurance of confidentiality and respect for privacy and voluntary disclosure were observed. Every FGD session and in-depth interview conducted for this study was done with parental permission and in the presence of a social worker or barangay official.
- 7 The Maranao is the predominant Filipino Muslim tribe in Lanao.
- 8 Ten out of sixteen of those interviewed were female.
- 9 Sixteen of the twenty-one who took part in the FGDs were male.
- 10 Even after long delays, Fivush and Shukat (cited in Sattler, 1995) aver that children between the ages of three and six years would be able to give coherent, detailed accounts of past events.
- 11 They stopped schooling when their families evacuated. War further damaged many of the schoolbuildings, and repairs had to be done before classes could resume. Some public high schools had to close down because of decreased enrolment as many of those who evacuated failed to come back. In Munai, the public school was not rebuilt after it was bombed in 2003.
- 12 The ordinal sibling position is deemed significant in family crisis situation, implying responsibility put to bear on those born earlier to fend for themselves as there is no one older to take care of them.
- 13 The National Demographic and Health Survey 2003 placed the national average of household size at 4.8.

14 A follow-up inquiry revealed low educational attainment by most residents in the latter area. There is no public school in Matampay. However, a Madrasah school was built by the Special Zone for Peace and Development Fund (SZOPAD Fund) in 2002.

15 Bedwetting.

16 This girl was blindfolded and gagged upon capture.

17 Using the forest route, the evacuees would have covered about thirty kilometers to get to Marawi City.

18 People went their separate ways during evacuation.

19 The only classes held in Barangay Matampay were for Islamic instruction at the Madrasah school built by the SZOPAD Fund in 2002.

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