

HDPR Cluster Peace Statement

The Human Development and Poverty Reduction Cabinet Cluster deeply sympathizes with our countrymen and -women in Mindanao, many of whom continue to suffer from the protracted armed conflict in the region. We fully support the President in his view that justice should be meted out to the perpetrators of meaningless violence on all sides.

But we firmly believe that war is not the solution to this long-term historical problem, and that much can ultimately be resolved by addressing the deeper problems of poverty and underdevelopment that continue to plague much of our nation's South. Inequality, in fact, has been a primary reason for the continuation of this insurgency through so many generations: indeed, the human development index in ARMM is arguably the worst in the entire country, part of a legacy of decades of armed struggle.

It has become increasingly clear that armed conflict has failed to lessen these social inequities and has led instead to greater hunger and social unrest. Past armed conflict has not only left unresolved many critical issues at the root of Muslim disaffection; it has also wrought serious devastation – all the while reducing areas in Sulu, Basilan and parts of the Zamboanga Peninsula to almost total ruin, helping to make them rich areas of recruitment for armed resistance.

Agricultural production has been continually disrupted in these areas of conflict – further aggravating existing hunger and poverty. Improvements in agricultural production require dependable peace and order, an environment that improves, rather than destroys, infrastructure and a credible government presence that goes beyond defense forces and military operations.

Conflict not only stifles investment and compromises public expenditures on basic services; it also weakens the affected populace in very profound ways. Valuable government resources are spent on addressing the destructive, long-term effects of population displacement instead of focusing on developmental efforts that would allow human capital to flourish.

In the final analysis, it is the poor who have borne the brunt of these unresolved disputes – decimated communities, broken dreams, shattered lives.

Programs that significantly reduce the socio-political and environmental vulnerabilities of the poor are therefore vital. The *Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan* (PAMANA) Program, for one, plays a crucial role in developing communities, creating sustainable livelihoods and improving tenures in areas affected by armed conflict. By increasing access to services and infrastructure, these areas can be transformed into peaceful and progressive communities. However, so long as local perception remains that the government in Manila is unwilling or unable to bring meaningful development to the area, the residents will remain easily convinced that their only hope for a better life lies with armed struggle.

Ultimately, peace is essential for economic development and nation-building. The Cluster therefore supports President Aquino in his efforts to sustain the existing mechanisms for dialogue among all parties involved in the conflict. We strongly urge our Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters to be patient and remain faithful to the peace process. Many sources of

disagreement are now generations old and no longer amenable to short-term solutions; instead, elements of peaceful resolution will require much greater give and take, carefully crafted policies and a great deal of good will on all sides.

In this way, we hope to honor not only our brave and committed troops, but also those of the disaffected and deeply aggrieved residents of Mindanao, most of whom fervently aspire for a peaceful resolution to a conflict that, tragically, has come to define their everyday lives.