Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies

journal homepage: https://www.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/HRPS/index

Interreligious Dialogue in Thailand and the Philippines: Overview, Trends and Trajectories

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: *01-Jun-2022*

Revised: *22-Jun-2022*

Accepted: *22-Jun-2022*

Keywords:

Inter-religious dialogue, conflict transformation by peaceful means, peacebuilding, ethnic conflict, Southern Thailand and Mindanao

ABSTRACT

This study gives an overview on how inter-religious dialogue *(IRD)* is used as a tool to transform conflict and build peace in two southeast Asian contexts, the Mindanao of the Philippines and three Southernmost provinces of Thailand where ethnic conflict becomes protracted. The study employs secondary data analysis using both academic articles and reports of activity from various organizations and agencies. It finds out that in both contexts the practice and usage of IRD are shaped by both international trends on IRD and the local actors' perceptions on conflict and their roles in conflict transformation *(CT)* and peace building *(PB)*. Most actors regard IRD as a good platform for trust, relationship, and capacity building for the affected communities. In both contexts the elicitive approach in IRD is present. IRD of the Philippines seems to project more vital elicitive traits as there is a stronger and more active involvement of religious leaders and institutions in IRD. In both contexts, IRD is and will be most likely regarded as a part of conflict transformation and peacebuilding schemes by state and non-state actors alike. However, because of its rather indirect and long-term impact to conflict and violent situation, it will most likely not occupy the prime position in those schemes.

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ISSN (Online): 2697-3804

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue (IRD)[3] has long been recognized as a tool for conflict transformation and peacebuilding by state, non-state and international actors around the world. This recognition given to IRD has increasingly intensified in the 21st century since the 9/11 incident. One of the strong signals of the importance of IRD for today's context started with the actions of the United Nations in the 2000s. In its resolution 56/6 of 9 November 2001, the *Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilization*s, the United Nations General Assembly had stressed the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding, and cooperation for peace. In 2007 with its resolution 62/90 of 17 December 2007, the idea was further endorsed and called for concrete actions among the member states (United Nations General Assembly, 2008). It also announced in 2010 that 2011-2020 was the *Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace*. Echoing the UNGA's resolution, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO proposed in 2013 that the period 2013-2022 be proclaimed as the *International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures* in which interreligious dialogue will be actively promoted as a part of the plan to mainstream Culture of Peace worldwide (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2013).

These actions by the UN and UNESCO, the two leading international actors, which later snowballed to similar actions at regional and national levels, perhaps confirm two crucial points perceived by the world community. First, the 21st century, the era characterized by the rise of religious extremism, nationalism, tension and violent conflicts between religious groups within a state's boundaries and beyond, seems to perfectly fit into the description of the *'Clash of Civilization'* projected by the late Samuel P. Huntington in 1996. Second, IRD, together with other forms of interreligious cooperation promoting better understanding and relationships between

[3] We use the term interreligious dialogue interchangeably with interfaith dialogue. Some scholars distinguish the two terms, following the usage of the World Council of Churches. To them, 'interreligious dialogue' refers to dialogue within a religious tradition, while 'interfaith dialogue' means dialogue between different religious groups, say between Buddhists and Muslims. We use 'intrareligious or intrafaith dialogue' in the same sense as the World Council's interreligious dialogue.

religious groups, is unanimously viewed by global actors as the key solution for these religious-driven or religious-related issues we face.

In Southeast Asia, the region characterized by its ethno-religious diversity and known for at least three protracted ethnic conflicts, the perception of the *Clash of Civilization* and *Dialogue among Civilization*—the idea that interreligious dialogues are useful to ease ethno-religious conflict and tension—also thrives, probably even before the 9/11 incident. For example, in the Philippines, IRD emerged as means to transform the Mindanao conflict since the 1970s. In Thailand, religious groups have since the 1960s started their interreligious dialogue platforms to tackle development issues even before the year 2004 when the recent episode of the *Unrest*—a term used in referring to the violent conflict between Thai Buddhist state and Malay-Muslim insurgent groups in the three southernmost provinces—erupted. However, with the lack of in-depth study on the history of IRD, how it is used and, especially, its contribution to conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia and particularly in Thailand and the Philippines, it is difficult for scholars and practitioners to understand its trends and trajectories, and accordingly, to effectively plan for conflict transformation and peacebuilding schemes involving IRD as a key activity for the protracted conflicts.

This article aims to answer three main and persisting questions about IRD in Thailand and the Philippines: (1) Under which manner, scope, and purposes has IRD been used in Thailand and the Philippines? (2) In which way has IRD contributed to the conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Thailand's and the Philippines' restive south? And (3) what are the trends and trajectories of IRD in the two contexts? The authors employ secondary data analysis using academic articles and reports of IRD and peacebuilding activity from sources like government and non-governmental agencies/organizations. Examining trends and trajectories of IRD in the two contexts from the prescriptive (experts-know-best approach) versus elicitive (local actors-based approach) peacebuilding framework, we argue that IRD is used in the two contexts on the elicitive, rather than prescriptive, ground. The elicitive characteristics of IRD in the Philippines seem to be much more prominent than that of Thailand, with the active participation and engagement of religious leaders and institutions. Relying heavily on educational actors and scholars to serve as dialogue organizers and facilitators, Thailand's IRD still bears certain prescriptive traits. This difference stems mainly from

how differently local religious actors and institutions of the two contexts view themselves and their roles in the conflict scenario.

The Universal Understandings of Dialogue and Inter-Religious Dialogue (IRD): Its Principles, Types and Contributions in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding

Similar to most concepts widely used by both academicians and practitioners, dialogue comes with a myriad of definitions, and none of them has been recognized as the central definition of dialogue. Leading scholars, mediators and practitioners like Arendt (1968), Freire (1972), Swidler (1987), Mojzes (1989), Bohm (1996), Saunders (1999), Ropers (2004), and all came up with their definitions of dialogue. Some, like Swidler (1987) and Ropers (2004), viewed dialogue as a style of *face-to-face communication* between two or more people, while others, like Sarti et al. (2004), stress the usage of dialogue—dialogue is *a problem-solving platform* that engages various groups of people with different views. One of the most classic definitions of dialogue that later outlines the essence of dialogue is, without a doubt, proposed by David Bohm in 1996 in his book *On Dialogue*. Bohm (1996, p. 6) stated the following:

> I give a meaning to the word "dialogue" that is somewhat different from what is commonly used. The derivations of words often help to suggest a deeper meaning. "Dialogue" comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means "the word," or in our case we would think of the "meaning of the word." And dia means "through"—it doesn't mean "two."...The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of *a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us*.[4] This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all.

[4] The phrase in Italic is by us, not in the original text.

> It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together.

From the above statement, we interpret that Bohm views dialogue as a dynamic activity in which people come to share and exchange meanings of things around them, and from those diverse meanings, they construct new understanding and shared meaning that later promotes social cohesion. Similar to Bohm, Swidler (1987) also perceives dialogue as a means for people of diverse views and experiences to enlarge their perspective on certain issues or to develop better and holistic understanding of a situation. To those who do not understand dialogue well, dialogue is regarded as a process in which they could bring their opponents to hear their stories, experiences, grievances, and feelings. At the end of the session, their opponents will change their perceptions and the course of their actions. This is not at all the goal of having a dialogue. The focus of dialogue is not the attempt to persuade others to think like us or see the world as we see but it is the efforts dedicated to our self-growth and self-learning (Swidler, 1987; Bohm, 1996; Suwanbhubbha, 2009). Swidler (1987, p. 6) addressed this point clearly when he stated that "the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow."

How can a dialogue promote self-growth and self-learning? The answer to this crucial question lies in an underlining process of dialogue: *deep listening*. Suwanbhubbha (2009, p. 25-26) stresses that in the process of deep listening, participants will be asked to listen attentively to others, suspend judgments, extract meanings from verbal and non-verbal communication of others, and then perform a self-reflection. Saunders (1999, p. 22) notes similarly and adds that self-reflection will increase the level of understanding one has towards others, and gradually, empathy will grow in one's heart, leading to the possibility of change in one's actions toward others. This projected outcome of dialogue at the individual level is often stressed by dialogue scholars and practitioners when they regard dialogue as a *relationship-building activity*. When other forms of communication like discussion, negotiation, and debate tend to promote a sense of adversary and competitiveness among participants, the dialogue goes for the opposite route. When most, if not all, perceptions and viewpoints concerning a situation are picked to explore in a dialogue session, dialogue becomes a space where equality prevails. Bohm (1996, p. 7) emphasizes this unique trait of dialogue when he

states: "*In a dialogue, however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it*."

Being a type of dialogue, interreligious dialogue (IRD) bears the aforementioned characteristics and goals. IRD is a space in which people of different religious affiliations come to interact, genuinely share and exchange feelings, perceptions, and experiences related to an issue. According to the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue-KAICIID (2021, p. 9), IRD works best for the situation in which cultural and religious identity serves as the key identity of the stakeholders, the differences in religious beliefs and culture play certain roles in the formation of the conflict, and socio-cultural and religious boundaries between groups are so rigid that they pose obstacles to conflict transformation (CT) and peacebuilding (PB). It was around the late 1980s and 1990s that IRD was integrated in CT and PB; during that time, western scholars began to set IRD ground rules and principles, and conflict workers, and peacebuilders too started their IRD initiatives in areas where religious tension was present.

Nevertheless, IRD has been around long before that. Some, like Ariarajah (1991) and Suwanbhubbha (2009), say it can be traced back to the 10-day World Missionary Conference held in Edinburg, Scotland, in 1910. These scholars tend to stress the roles and initiatives of the Christian community and institutions as IRD pioneers.[5] However, another historical event, the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions held as part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the United States, has also been widely noted as the first and genuine interreligious dialogue marked by the participation of a large number of religious actors from various religious groups across the world. Despite being quite lacking in terms of official representations of some religious communities and concrete outcomes, the event was considered a good start for future interreligious dialogue and cooperation (New World Encyclopedia, 2022).

The practice and usage of interreligious dialogue around the world tend to be embedded in the guidelines and principles outlined by western scholars as well as international organizations

[5] The Christian contribution to IRD is recognizable and undeniable throughout the world. In Southeast Asia, the roles of the Catholics and Protestants towards IRD have been quite prominent. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC), for example, has, with its systematic models and guideline on interreligious peacebuilding, served as a driving force of IRD in the region for many decades.

during the 1980s and 1990s. Apart from Bohm, Leonard Swidler is among the influential thinkers on dialogue and interreligious dialogue thinkers, whose famous work in 1983 '*The Dialogue Decalogue'* sets types and underlining principles of interreligious dialogue. He classified types of dialogue: Dialogue of Head, Dialogue of Heart, Dialogue of Hands and Dialogue of Holy. Headley (2020) notes that these dialogues are also called Dialogue of Theological Exchange, Dialogue of Life, Dialogue of Action and Dialogue of Religious Experiences, respectively.[6] It should be noted that the Catholic Church was the first institution that classified dialogue under these names; these types of dialogue were first presented in the document Dialogue and Proclamation of the Catholic Church (Dialogue and Proclamation, 1991).[7] The first type of dialogue, Dialogue of Theological Exchange, was regarded as the first and classic form of interreligious dialogue. It is a platform in which 'specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.' (Thangaraj, 1999, p. 95). Its engagement with 'specialists'—referring to theologians, religious leaders and scholars or we would say 'high level actors'—sets it apart from the other three types of dialogue which can take place in a much more casual setting and between middle or grassroots members of two or more religious communities. Dialogue of Life is, according to Sintang et al. (2012) and Headley (2020), a way one learns about the way life of people adhering to different religions via daily interaction and exchange. This type of dialogue often takes place at the community level and is mostly unplanned. Dialogue of Action, as noted by Headley (2020), is a collaboration of people of different religions for a problem-solving purpose while Dialogue of Religious Experiences is, similar to Dialogue of life, a form of exchange between individuals on their spiritual experiences related to the meaning of life, death, happiness and other concepts tied to the very existence of man. All these four types of dialogue are usually featured in most CT and PB schemes by both religious and non-religious groups worldwide.

[6] Some scholars, like Hill (Hill et al., 1990, p. 203-4), classify dialogue into 3, not 4, types. They combine Dialogue of Life with Dialogue of Religious Experiences and call it Dialogue of Prayer or Experience instead.

[7] The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue published the document Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in 1991 to clarify the essential link between dialogue with other religions and the the mission of the Church to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This brings to light the implications of the Vatican II document Nostra Aetate, which is the landmark teaching of the Catholic Church on interreligious dialogue.

According to the majority of literature on IRD we came across, most dialogue scholars and practitioners highly and positively noted IRD's contribution to CT and PB. Catholic Relief Services-CRS (2017), with its over two decade-long engagement in interreligious dialogue and actions spanning across continents, acknowledged IRD as a crucial instrument for promoting inclusivity, building relationship and trust, and creating ambience for sustainable peace and development.[8] KAICIID (2021, p. 9) also remarked that IRD serves '*to transform perspectives and support viewing religious and cultural differences not as obstacles but as starting points of a process that aims to find sustainable solutions for the common good*.' Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development-OECD (2008) which works for conflict prevention and peacebuilding since the 1990s also mentioned IRD as contributing to the success in promoting the culture of justice, truth and reconciliation. Our perception of IRD based on a decade-long serving as IRD facilitators and organizers in Thailand's southernmost provinces and Mindanao resonates with the aforementioned remarks. However, IRD as we perceive and experience contributes much more at the personal and interpersonal level than at the grander societal level. We have seen IRD affecting our participants on one or more of the 5 dimensions listed by Schirch and Campt (2007, p. 71-73): *knowledge* (of the facts related to an issue), *awareness* (of their role in an issue), *motivation* (to take action), *skills* (in communication and problem-solving), and *connection to others*. When it offers individuals opportunities to grow in these 5 dimensions, it can be said that IRD does groom them to be *agents for change*. With the increase in the number of agents for change, a cordial relationship and trust serving as *infrastructure for peace* can be created in society. This infrastructure for peace will later enhance inter-group collaborations and make possible the transformation of violent destructive patterns to potentials for creative, constructive, non-violent capacity to deal with human conflict, one of the ultimate goals for CT and PB.

Interreligious Dialogue in Thailand: Its Brief History and Current State of Practice and Usage for the Unrest

[8] CRS' IRD and interreligious actions started in the southern Philippines and expanded across a diverse array of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and Southeast Asia.

Thailand is home to the largest number of Buddhists in Southeast Asia. According to the National Statistics Office of Thailand (2019), about 93.5 percent of the Thai population of approximately 70,000,000 adheres to Theravada Buddhism. The second-largest religious group is the Muslims, constituting about 5 percent of the population, followed by Christians (1.1 percent) and other minority groups (less than 1 percent) like the Confucians, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Atheists. Before the manifestation of the violence in the deep south in 2004, the relationship between religious communities in Thailand was considered 'unproblematic', particularly in the eyes of the majority Buddhist population. However, the conflict between the Siamese court, later Thai state, and ethno-religious minority groups has existed since the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767 A.D.), and it was mostly related to the issue of religious propagation.[9] The skepticism and fear of losing their people to other religious groups as well as other forms of prejudice Thai-Buddhists, particularly Thai state actors, have toward non-Buddhist groups later ignited the state's assimilation policies on ethno-religious minority groups since the beginning of the 20th century. The assimilation policies were regarded as necessary by the state, citing that it could enhance the sense of nationalism and facilitate the construction of Thai national identity embedded in the concepts of Nation, Religion (largely referred to as Buddhism), and Monarchy. Due to the imbalance of political power structure in which the Thai-Buddhists dominate, religious minority groups had no choice but to endure the assimilation process while trying to find strategies to preserve and transmit their ethno-religious identity.[10]

Looking through her rich history of religious and cultural interaction, it is clear that Thailand is not exempt from ethno-religious tension. There has always been a need for IRD and other forms of interreligious actions to handle such tension and promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

[9]Phongphit (1984, p. 16) noted some crucial incidents taken place in Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Rattanakosin (Bangkok) periods in which the Court of Siam felt threatened by the active propagation of the Catholic Church and ordered all Catholic missionaries to leave the country. In Thonburi time, the tension was so great that churches were destroyed and the Christians had to run for their lives, leading to the disappearance of Christian community in Thonburi.

[10] See, for example, Buadeang (2003); Leangaramsri (2003); Reynolds (2004); Wunkaew (2007); Aewsriwong (2008) and Nilsen (2012) on the issue of nationalism, nation-building, the state's assimilation policies and minority groups' counteractions and their strategies for identity maintenance and consolidation.

But it was not until the 1960s that IRD was introduced to Thai society. According to Seri Phongphit (1984), IRD emerged in Thailand with initiatives by the Catholics and the Buddhists after the former got inspired by the Vatican Council II (1962-1965) and later the 1967 Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures of *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. In 1969 a small group of Catholic priests and laymen and lay Buddhist leaders began to organize consultation workshops and seminars jointly, considered the first series of IRD in Thailand. IRDs of that period were mostly Dialogues of Theological Exchange with the engagement of high-level religious leaders from the Catholic side and Thai Buddhist lay scholars. While the Catholic community has always been eager to participate in IRD and other forms of interreligious collaboration, the participation of high-level Buddhist monks or key Buddhist institutions like the Sangha Supreme Council (SSC) and Religious Division of the Ministry of Education, which was the origin of the National Office of Buddhism (NOB, est. in 2002), in Dialogue of Theological Exchange organized in the 1960s and 1970s was quite lacking. Despite being the official representatives of a majority group, they advanced IRD and interreligious actions with little enthusiasm.

As the country enters into the stage of rapid modernization and inevitably experiences the wide-ranging effects of globalization, the tension between ethno-religious groups constantly rises due to the competition for scarce resources as well as the socio-political and economic power. The Catholic Council of Thailand for Development (CCTD) was established in 1973, and it has played a key role in the organization of IRD and other interreligious actions in Thailand, tackling development issues (Phongphit, 1984). In 1980 Thai Interreligious Commission for Development (TICD) was established to be a larger platform for CCTD, Buddhist NGOs, and Buddhist faith-based organizations to collaborate for more concrete actions. Accordingly, Buddhist-Christian relations were strengthened during this period. Observing the works of TICD in the 1970s-1980s, it becomes quite clear to us that the Thai IRD model was shifted from Dialogue of Theological Exchange to Dialogue of Action with issues concerning socio-economic development, resource management and education positioned at its epicenter.

Throughout the 1990s up until the present time, Dialogue of Action remains the most popular type of IRD in most parts of Thai society. Dialogue of Life also takes place at community and

interpersonal levels in areas where religious communities exist alongside one another. Dialogue of Theological Exchange, though noted as the basis for the development of the rest of the three types of dialogue, has not been highly appreciated by Thai people. Suwannabhubbha (2009) noted interestingly that most Thais, especially the government officials, tend to perceive Dialogue of Theological Exchange and any other discussion and exchange regarding core religious principles as a catalyst for conflict formation and, accordingly, feel reluctant to engage or promote it. Yacovone (2012, p. 30) mentioned a Dialogue of Action was organized for people to address the political conflict that characterized the trend of IRD from the 2000s onwards. Academic institutions, NGOs, and faith-based organizations—such as the Thousand Stars Foundation, International Network of Engaged Buddhists, and Bangkok's Foundation of Islamic Center of Thailand—have played a leading role as the organizer and promoter of IRD at present (Yacovone, 2012; Network for Peace, 2022).

Thailand's Southern Unrest is a violent conflict taking place in the three southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, where the majority of the population are the Malay Muslims, and the Buddhists make up only a minority of the region's population.[11] It is an ethnic, not religious, conflict in which the issues of losing ethnic identity, marginalization, human rights violation, and socio-economic deprivation experienced by the Malays serve as its root causes. As religion forms a crucial part of the locals' ethnic identity and has been used by both the state and insurgent groups to increase the scope of violence and drive wedges between the two communities, a cordial relationship between the two religious communities is believed to help in transforming the situation. Since the violence erupted in 2004, there have been efforts by various actors to engage the Buddhists, Muslims, Sino-Thais of traditional beliefs and other religious minority groups into conflict transformation platforms and forums to build trust and foster better relationships. Some of these platforms and forums bear the word dialogue (*Sansewana*) or interreligious dialogue *(Sansewana Rawang Saatsana)* in their names, while the others do not yet exhibit dialogue characteristics and methods like deep listening, World Café, Open Space etc. In most cases, the platforms/forums with

[11] The Malays known also as *Melayu* is an ethnic minority group of approximately four percent of total Thailand's population of 67 million people. However, in three southernmost provinces they are a majority group accounting for about 80 percent of the population.

the word dialogue are organized based on dialogue principles and guidelines, with some exceptions of 'dialogue platforms' run by some state agencies which perceive 'dialogue' as one-way communication and would call representatives of religious communities to sit and listen to them only.[12]

According to the recent research by the Network for Peace (2022), academics and academic institutions are taking the lead in the organization of both inter and intra-religious dialogue as well as other forms of interreligious collaborations in the south; they often adopt the roles of both IRD practitioners and researchers. Institute of Peace Studies at Prince Songkhla University, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies at Mahidol University, Institute of Peace Studies at Taksin University, and Rajabat Yala University are among the leading IRD organizers. Some of these academic institutions work alone, while others collaborate with INGOs, NGOs, CSO, and state agencies. For example, in 2009, Mahidol University's Research Centre for Peace Building (MURP), now known as the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), jointly organized an interreligious dialogue for development in Pattani with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung-FES and the South Border Provinces Administrative Center-SBPAC—a special governmental body set up to oversee the management and development of the three southernmost provinces (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010). This collaboration becomes a channel for knowledge and skills transferring from western IRD scholars to their Thai counterparts. Some leading peacebuilding NGOs like Asian Resource Foundation Pattani (ARF-PATTANI) and faith-based organizations like Religions for Peace Thailand (*RfP* Thailand), with its secretariat office at IHRP, have also organized IRD since 2005 and 2009 respectively. IRD of ARF-Pattani tends to target youth groups while that of *RfP* Thailand focuses on three target groups: religious leaders, women, and youth.[13]

Religious actors and institutions in Thailand, both ones of the center and the South, seem to play peripheral and, most of the time, passive roles in IRD of the South. Throughout the past decades, the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand (SSCT) and the National Office of Buddhism

[12] Our remark resonates well with the perception on military-run dialogue of some academics working in the field of interfaith dialogue in the South presented in the research report of the Network for Peace in 2022.

[13] More on IRD works of ARF-Pattani and *RfP* Thailand, see https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/arf-pattani/?location=thailand&theme and www.thairfpirc.com respectively.

Thailand (NOBT), the lay institution, have not been active in any form of interreligious collaboration, including IRD. Despite having a division on *Interreligious Affairs*, NOBT's 2020 report shows no single interreligious activity. The majority of the NOBT's works are dedicated to the promotion and protection of Buddhism and to making Thailand the center of the world's Buddhism. Since the violence in the south erupted in 2004, the two institutions have performed mostly humanitarian roles, providing socio-economic assistance to the Buddhist community in the area. Buddhist and Muslim religious actors at the center seldom engage in IRD organized in the south, citing that they do not know the situation enough (Yunyasit et al, 2015).

The southern religious leaders of both religions have participated in IRD platforms organized by academic institutes and civil society. It is quite rare that they take the leading role as an IRD organizer. According to an unpublished research report on the role of Buddhism and its actors in the CT of the Unrest by Yunyasit et al. (2015), the majority of 26 Buddhist religious actors interviewed perceive that the task of building peace in the South belongs to the state and its agencies. If the SSCT or Buddhist monks become too active in any CT and peacebuilding efforts, they will be regarded as 'doing secular works', crossing the forbidden lines. Safety concerns may be one of the reasons contributing to moderate responses to interreligious actions and IRD from Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders in the south. Since 2004, both monks and imams, especially those who can work across religious boundaries and serve as a unifying force between Buddhis-Muslim-state actors, have long been the targets of violent attacks by insurgent groups.[14] To appear eagerly engaged in interreligious actions could do more harm than good to them.

According to reports of activities of some leading IRD organizers for the south (Research Center for Peacebuilding, 2011; Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University and Center for Security Studies, 2016; Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; Religions for Peace Thailand, 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; Ropers & Anuvatudom, 2013; Institute for Research and Development of Southern Border Region, Rajabat Yala University, 2018) and some other sources (Nimanong, 2012; Network for Peace, 2022), we learn that IRD

[14] Thai PBS (2020) reported that from 2004-2020, Twenty-one Buddhist monks and novices have been killed in the three southernmost provinces. See more https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/277126.

organized by academic institutions, NGOs and faith-based organizations in the south are usually of small-scale. These IRD usually target at a time between 20-40 middle-level actors as participants, and most of them can be classified into Dialogue of Action. Topics of these Dialogue of Action vary from addressing concerns over certain state's policies, advancing more participation in peace processes and natural resources management to tackling economic hardship and promoting local businesses. Most of these IRD usually come with or are followed by field visits for participants to learn more or engage in Dialogue of Life happening on the ground, capacity-building workshops, or small projects to promote Dialogue of Life or deeper collaborations. These small projects are usually led by IRD participants themselves, but funded by the IRD organizers or sponsors. One of the grandest Dialogue of Action ever organized in the south took place in 2009 in Pattani. Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University with support from Religions for Peace International and some local Islamic institutions, was the organizer of the event that lasted for three days. More than 70 religious leaders in Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and some other Thai cities gathered to brainstorm on their roles in CT and PB for the south. This event also gave birth to the Religions for Peace-Interreligious Council of Thailand, which, for the past decade, works to promote IRD culture among religious communities in the south and beyond.

Most scholars agree that IRD and any dialogue in general, should create an impact on the individual, community/group, and structure or societal levels (Schirch & Campt, 2007; Suwannabhubbha, 2009; Ropers 2004,). It is not so difficult to assess the impacts at the individual level like the 5 dimensions listed by Schirch and Campt (2007, p. 71-73): *knowledge* (of the facts related to an issue), *awareness* (of their role in an issue), *motivation* (to take action), *skills* (in communication and problem-solving), and *connection to others*. The organizers could interview participants or ask them to do a questionnaire after the sessions to see whether the dialogue has affected them in those five or more dimensions. Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Prince Songkhla University, and Religions for Peace Thailand employ these assessment methods. They report positive feedback from participants in terms of self-growth and self-learning (Ropers & Anuvatudom, 2013; Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, 2020; Religions for Peace Thailand, 2018; 2019).

IRD organizers, however, face difficulties when they wish to evaluate or measure impacts of their IRD on community/group and structural levels and to link impacts on individuals to societal impacts, say to identify a concrete causal relationship between the positive change in individuals participating in IRD with the decrease in the number of violent incidents in the south. It is partly because of 2 reasons: (1) this type of impact usually takes a longer time to manifest itself, and (2) no proper assessment tool has been developed for this task. According to Network for Peace (2022), the 19 Thai IRD experts they interviewed acknowledge the similar difficulty in measuring the impact and success of IRD. Ropers (2004) also remarked that it is quite rare to see the result of dialogue 'directly translated into official measures' to generate change. Apparently, IRD's inability to create instant, visible and measurable impact at institutional, structural, or societal levels is often regarded by some as its greatest shortcoming, and it is the reason why some, as noted by Schirch and Campt (2007, p. 71), view dialogue and IRD as 'soft activity'. Though we largely agree with the said difficulties in assessing IRD's impact and contribution to macro levels, we view IRD as necessary for trust and relationship building for the south of Thailand. IRD can fit well into CT and PB theory and framework embedded in a long-term rather than short-term, oriented approach.

Interreligious Dialogue in the Philippines: Its Brief History and Current State of Practice and Usage for the Conflict in Mindanao

Known as the only Christian country in Asia before the independence of East Timor in 2002, the Philippines constitutes 83 percent Catholics, 9 percent other Christians such as the protestants, evangelicals, and the Pentecostals, and 6 percent Muslim and around 2 percent of Indigenous peoples[15] of the 106 Million total population (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018). As a young country in Southeast Asia, the Philippines had been under colonial rule, mostly with Spain for 350 years and America for 50 years. This period of colonization has brought about the historical and enduring conflict in Mindanao, which is the home of the Muslims and Lumads (the Indigenous

[15] Various indigenous tribes inhabited the archipelago prior to Islamization and Christianization. The indigenous peoples today are those people of the islands in the archipelago who are independent communities or villages or clans and live a unique culture, tradition and religion. They are the communities who were able to defend their territories and evade the colonizers, maintaining their relative independence while continuing to practice their own systems and ways of life.

peoples). The historical relation among them is the context of and a fundamental challenge to inter-religious dialogue in the Philippines. McAmis, for example, considers the Spanish colonization as a crucial factor in understanding the Christian-Muslim relation. He "claims that the present-day relations and tensions are a direct result of this particular period of history" (1987, p. 39). Larousse (2001), in his book *Walking Together Seeking Peace,* presents the Christian-Muslim relation from a historical perspective. He argues that the "issue of history will remain a topic in Muslim-Christian relations" (p. 416). Konsult Mindanaw (2010, p.12) claims that the root cause of the absence of peace in Mindanao is the "lack of understanding of historical crimes and insensitivity to other people's identities, cultures, and traditions". While acknowledging that there was a common identity and shared culture before the arrival of Islam, According to Archbishop Capalla (2004, p. 350), the convenor of the Bishop-Ulama Conference, "these commonalities slowly eroded with the historical experience. The enmity between the Muslims and the Christians has been the product of historical factors".

In navigating this historical conflict, religious communities and faith-based organizations have played a key role in pursuing peacebuilding. Following the levels used by Kadayifci-Orellana (2013), a multi-religious based movement includes the high-level religious leaders in the organization as a Board or Council, ensuring proper and equal representation from various religions at all levels of the organization. The multi-religious component is a formalized relation translated into codes and organizational operation. The common values and distinctiveness of each religion in the organization, therefore, is what is manifested and promoted, in the organizational programs and activities. Thus, the mid-level and the grassroots level retain the multi-religious aspect, which is the very character of the organizational Council or Board. A good example of this type is the Bishop-Ulama Conference and the Religions for Peace Philippines.

The phenomenon of inter-religious dialogue in the Philippines has emerged as a mechanism to address social division and conflict toward CT and PB (Bragado, 1995; Coronel-Ferrer, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Gowing, 1978; Bishop-Ulama Conference, 2010; Larousse, 2001; Majul, 1987; Bienvenido, 1988). Social integration, in general, is a process of social interaction with the end in view of achieving unity and harmony between and among the diverse classes and members of society.

In inter-religious dialogue, the relationship with the other is determined by and under the framework of the primacy of religious beliefs. This assumes that religion defines the foundational meaning of the culture and existence of an individual and the community. Inter-religious dialogue movements started in the 1960s with the formation of the Ecumenical Union of Moral Leaders. By 1970, there was already a "conscious effort" among the local religious leaders in Mindanao to organize dialogues among various faith communities. It was during this time that special attention was given to Muslim-Christian relations by the Catholic Church through the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference. Another active group was the Program Aimed at Christian Education about Muslims (PACEM) sponsored by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. In February 1981, Pope John Paul II met with Muslim leaders in Davao during his visit to the Philippines. He encouraged them to seek a genuine dialogue between Muslims and Christians. Interfaith efforts in the Philippines are an active response to the perceived issues and conflict in the Mindanao.

In this study, we will focus on the interreligious dialogue approaches of the two multi-faith religious organizations in the Philippines: The Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC) and the Religions for Peace Philippines. The BUC, established in 1992 under the recommendations of the National Unification Commission, represents the Bishops of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, members of the National Ulama Conference of the Philippines, and bishops from the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. Religions for Peace Philippines **(**RfPP**)** or Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, Philippines was born at the inception of the regional interreligious body called Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, at the University of Louvain, Belgium in 1974. Muslims, Christians (both Protestants and Catholics), Buddhists and Hindus are represented in its leadership. Religions for Peace Philippines is committed to promoting peace through interfaith dialogue, peace facilitation, and healing and reconciliation.

BUC was established to pursue the sixth element of the National Unification Commission[16], which is "to build, nurture and enhance a positive climate for peace," (Coronel-Ferrer, 2002) through

[16] President Fidel V. Ramos issued the Executive Order No. 19, s 1992 Constituting the National Unification Commission (NUC) as an advisory board to the President for the peace process and amnesty programs that will lead to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the country. Based on national consultations, the NUC identified the 'six paths to peace': The first was pursuit of social, economic, and political reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of armed struggle and social unrest.

inter-religious dialogue. Thus, the key approach undertaken by BUC is fundamentally the dialogue of religious experience and theological exchange. Based on the guiding principle that "the spiritual bases for peace from both Muslim and Christian religious traditions, grounded in the belief in one God, a common origin and a common destiny for all" (Ledesma, 2012), the BUC has worked on the high-to-mid level dialogue between and among Muslims, Christians (Protestants and Catholic), and then later with Lumad religious leaders. These dialogue meetings cover two areas: (1) spiritual dimensions and (2) concerns arising from the ongoing Philippine Panel and MILF peace process (Ledesma, 2012).

An important result of these high-level and localized dialogue meetings is the growing openness and mutual respect from each faith's traditions to discuss and reflect on social and other pressing issues such as the kidnappings of foreign missionaries, violent incidents against Muslims or Christians and others. It is not surprising to note that such a high-level meeting did not only bring the religious leaders into an open dialogue to share their respective faiths and how these multi-faith traditions can be an avenue toward peacebuilding. At best, those meetings have become the very avenue to develop friendship, trust, and even a common identity as Mindanaoans. Moreover, BUC was also instrumental as a bridge between the warring faction—the government and its military arm and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front during the all-out war of the Estrada's administration in 2000—and the outbreak of violence because of the cancellation of the Supreme Court on the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) in 2008. During these armed conflict situations where talks between the government and the armed group broke down, BUC acted as a neutral party to bring the parties back to the negotiating table and stop hostilities. Through dialogue meeting statements, BUC has also consistently condemned the act of extremist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf as "un-Islamic."

The second path was consensus building and empowerment for peace through continuous consultation at the national and local levels. The third was peace negotiations with armed groups. The fourth path was implementing measures for reconciliation, reintegration of former combatants and rehabilitation of those affected by the conflict. The fifth was conflict management and protection of civilians. The sixth path aimed to build, nurture and enhance a positive climate for peace. Interreligious dialogue as a mechanism for CT and PB belongs to the sixth path.

According to Dr. Lilian Sison,[17] ACRP Secretary General, Religions for Peace Philippines (RfPPhl) has three main tracts of programs and activities: Engendering a climate of dialogue by advancing inter-religious collaboration on social issues, a strategic grassroots approach through healing and capacity building, and strengthening partnerships for sustainable engagement in peacebuilding activities. These three tracts build on the moral ascendancy and strong leadership of senior religious leaders to form the network and collaboration between and among religious communities, civil society organizations, and relevant government agencies to work together on pressing issues. Prominent in the engagement of Religions for Peace Philippines is the multi-religious and multi-sectoral high-level discussions in approaching the peace and justice issue in Mindanao. RfPPhl, through the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) and Religions for Peace International (RfP International), has engaged the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) in a series of conversations for the role and contributions of the multi-religious sector in the then on-going negotiation between the MILF and the Philippine Government peace panel. These meetings aimed to explore possibilities of common action in promoting the peace process based on deeply held and widely accepted principles in the areas of youth education, research, and continuing interfaith dialogue.

At the grassroots level, RfPPhl has implemented the "Multi-Religious Approach to Support Children Affected by Conflict in Mindanao." In this program, RfPPhl aimed at providing healing and capacity building for children affected by the armed conflict through the spiritual resources of the religious communities. One key concern in this program is the very high percentage rate of children, including youth and adults, without birth registration among the Muslim and the Lumad communities. Birth registration was generally perceived as a mechanism for Christian conversion or that they were unaware of its significance in their social and political life. Through capacity-building programs and collaboration with the local government units, families have changed their views on

[17] Dr. Lilian J. Sison, a seasoned administrator of the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, is an environmental chemist by profession, was the secretary general of Religions for Peace Philippines, chair of the Asia Pacific Women of Faith Network (APWoFN), and served also as co-hair International Women of Faith Network. During her term as Secretary General, Religions for Peace Philippines has actively engaged in the conflict transformation and peace building issues and programs in the country, in particular Mindandao.

birth registration. RfPPhl, with the local government units, have collaborated for easy access and free registration for the Muslim and Lumad communities.

The emergence of inter-religious dialogue movements is basically a response to the historical and ongoing armed conflict in the southern part of the Philippines. One of the dire consequences of the conflict is the division between and among the Tri-People of Mindanao: Muslims, Lumads and Christians. The root of the conflict is the injustice that underlies the relations of the Tri-People (Quevedo, 2014). It appears that whatever is the identified source of conflict, whether it is value, land, governance, or economic and cultural system, it becomes standard for scholars writing on the conflict in Mindanao and Sulu to use the ethno-religious identities (Baybado 2017). The concepts Moros, Lumads, and Christians—which varies in reference from the Central government in Manila to the majority of the Filipinos and also to the Christian settlers in Mindanao—serves as the boundary of all discussions on the meanings of conflict, values, freedom, governance so and so forth. According to PCID, the "interweaving of religion and conflict" brought about the formation of interfaith dialogue organizations (Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, 2004). Although the conflict is complex and multilayered, it can be considered primarily as the "clash between two imagined nations or nationalism, Filipino and Moro" (Santos, 2005). In short, the conflict is an issue of identity and assimilation. Soliman Santos describes it as the prevalence of an "intercultural crisis." It refers to the uneasy relationship between the two cultures, namely the Christian majority and the Muslim minority. The latter is assimilated by the former under the banner of nationalism and Filipino as an identity, a reason for the adverse reaction of the Muslims as a grave violation of their historical right and ethno-religious identity.

This polarity between identity and assimilation becomes a more complex concern for inter-religious dialogue, considering that the uneasy relationship includes the aspiration for the indigenous cultural identity of the Lumads. Thus, the issue of religion and conflict pertains primarily to the condition by which the three religious traditions interact with the end of either creating a unified identity with a common culture or allowing diversity to thrive while keeping harmony between and among them (Baybado, 2018). External players such as the national government, the military, the secessionist movements, and other armed groups aggravate this concern.

Interreligious dialogue in the Philippines is generally oriented toward peacebuilding (Bishop-Ulama Conference, 2010; Larousse, 2001; Rodil, 2010). Peacebuilding "is a complex and dynamic process of changing relationships, perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, interests, and underlying structures that encourage and perpetuate violent conflicts." (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2013, p. 151). Peacebuilding through interreligious dialogue assumes the interweaving of religion and conflict. Thus, while religions are for peace, justice, and social harmony, inter-religious encounters at various levels may result in violence and conflict. Differences in religion have also been cited as a factor in the ongoing conflict in Mindanao.

A Brief Interreligious Dialogue's Trend and Trajectory Analysis

A few interesting observations can be drawn with the IRD landscape of Thailand and the Philippines presented in the two previous sections and they give us some perspectives on the current trends and the future of IRD there and in the region. The analysis we provide here will also shed some light on CT and PB trends in Southeast Asia as well as how crucial the roles of religious actors and communities in the CT and PB are or are perceived to be in the eyes of conflict workers and peacebuilders. It shows that the practice and usage of IRD in the two contexts are shaped by both international trends on IRD and the local actors' perceptions of conflict and their roles in CT and PB.

Trend and trajectory 1: *IRD is a thriving business for Thailand and the Philippines as it is elsewhere.* Despite its shortcomings addressed earlier, IRD is regarded as a vital ingredient by most leading CT and PB institutions and agencies working for peace in Thailand and the Philippines. This trend is not something beyond our expectations as it gets along with the overall IRD trend spotted in other Southeast Asian countries and the rest of the world. How has it become so popular? We can offer two reasons for this emerging trend, and they are mostly about the external influence on local conflict transformers and peacebuilders. The first reason is related to the rise of the Clash of Civilization–Dialogue of Civilization combination we mentioned earlier. When differences in ethnicity and religion are perceived either as primary catalysts or contributing factors to the 21st-century conflicts, the so-called remedy for such conflicts should then bear some religious characteristics.

Hence, it seems that IRD fits right into the picture of the two contexts where cultural and religious identity serves as the key identity of the conflict stakeholders.

Secondly, as we observe, the emergence of this trend also comes from the rising international development-peace approach for conflict prevention[18] and peacebuilding upheld by the community of peacebuilders around the world since the 1990s. The development-peace approach sets on the principle that the most effective way to prevent relapse of violence and to build sustainable peace is to identify, address and tackle the root causes of the conflict. In order to do that, it is important to build inclusive and broad partnerships across groups rather than rely solely on the vision and capacity of actors that control the means of violence and positions of power (World Bank, 2018). With this approach set for CT and PB of the protracted Unrest and Mindanao conflicts, religious leaders, communities and institutions are listed as among the valuable stakeholders and partners for preventing deadly conflict at the national level alongside civil society institutions, non-governmental organizations, especially the human rights and other advocacy groups, humanitarian and development organizations, academics and educational institutions, the media, and the business community (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997). Engaging religious leaders and members of religious communities in IRD becomes one of the best ways to create an inclusive partnership for sustainable peace in the south of Thailand and Mindanao.

Trend and trajectory 2: *It is elicitive rather than prescriptive IRD for Thailand and the Philippines*. Most of us are surely familiar with the juxtaposition/debate of prescriptive-elicitive models for knowledge and skills transferring in the conflict worker and peacebuilder community. According to Lederach (1995), the prescriptive modality, which was paired with the Conflict Resolution school, is the 'expert-know-best' approach in which the knowledge and experience of western scholars and practitioners are perceived as universal and applicable to all contexts. On the

[18] Conflict prevention as a concept usually appear alongside the term preventive diplomacy which, according to *Agenda for Peace*, refers to 'action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.' It is also widely recognized that preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are largely viewed as belonging to one broad category: *preventive action*. Conflict prevention consists of two features: 1) immediate, short-term measures to address conflict when it starts to escalate and 2) long-term measures to tackle issues serving as root cause of conflict such as social injustice, uneven distribution of resources, discrimination against minority groups, human rights violation and etc.

contrary, the elicitive model stresses the integration between the so-called universal knowledge and local wisdom, and cultural perspectives on how a conflict should be handled and tools to be used (Lederach, 1995). It has become one of the crucial features of the Conflict Transformation school wheeled by its leading scholars like Galtung, Lederach and many more. When we examine the IRD landscapes of the two contexts, it is clear to us that IRD is executed more under *elitictive than prescriptive* approach. The prime elicitive characteristics of Thai and Filipino IRD lie in the fact that most IRD organized in the two contexts are carried out by local actors, not foreign 'experts' or peacebuilders. These local actors know how to set IRD within their ethno-religious contexts and choose what is best for trust and relationship building. For example, they still use four types of dialogue 'prescribed' by the western world and scholars, but rather than going for the prescribed IRD menu with Dialogue of Theological Exchange set as the prime dish, most of them, with the exception of BUC of the Philippines, concentrate on delivering Dialogue of Action and Life instead. It is often the case in both countries that Dialogue of Theological Exchange is organized after a series of Dialogue of Action takes place and already bear some fruits in fostering better understanding and relationship among IRD participants.

It is important to note here that when comparing the two contexts, IRD of the Philippines seems to bear stronger elicitive traits. The active participation and involvement of religious leaders and institutions of Christianity and Islam as organizers and promoters of IRD for Mindanao since 1970 and the establishment of the Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC), a robust interreligious body overseeing IRD and other interfaith actions since 1992 has taken the elicitive approach to a much higher level. To us, these religious leaders and institutions are the *real* local actors shaping IRD form, structure and directions. IRD in Mindanao tends to reflect the perspectives on conflict transformation and peacebuilding of religious leaders and communities as well as their sense of IRD ownership. Relying heavily on academics to serve as dialogue organizers and facilitators, Thailand's IRD still bears certain prescriptive traits. It is often the case there that once the funding for IRD via academic institutions stops, IRD and its related activities also stop. Without the active engagement of Buddhist and Muslim religious institutions in the area, IRD there will continue to face the issue of continuity and sustainability. As we discussed earlier, most Thai religious leaders perceive that (1) state actors

have both the mandate and responsibilities to solve the Unrest and (2) getting too much involved in interreligious actions, including IRD, can put them at risk. If their perception remains the same for the next decade, it will be unlikely to see them stepping up to perform any more active role in IRD for the south.

Concluding remark

Societies around the world are advancing for more social cohesion, development and sustainable peace amid the rising ethno-religious tension. IRD has been recognized increasingly as one of the tools to achieve all those goals as it serves as a pathway for religions and their actors and communities to offer their own solutions to conflict and promote peace. Thailand and the Philippines are among those societies where IRD is used to relieve the protracted ethno-religious conflicts of their restive south. Conflict transformers and peacebuilders in the two countries recognize the strengths of IRD—it can create the infrastructure of peace, contribute to the cross-community trust and relationship building and serve as a great platform for interreligious actions tackling root causes of the conflict—as well as its weaknesses regarding its rather personal, indirect and long-term impact to conflict and violent situation. Knowing that IRD is neither a panacea nor a quick fix to their violent conflict, they tend to set their IRD goals at individual and community levels or use IRD in tackling specific issues faced by local ethno-religious communities. IRD seems to thrive well in both contexts as a CT and PB tool and it will be featured in CT and PB schemes for Thailand's southern border provinces and Mindanao. However, we project that it will not be occupying the center stage of those schemes in the two contexts. Still, there is a need for more research on the practice, usage, and assessment of IRD in Thailand, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian countries. With more knowledge in these areas, Southeast Asian practitioners can design IRD models that can generate better conflict transformation and peacebuilding outcomes for sustainable peace not only in their respective countries but in the whole region.

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