



Interfaith Partnership in Emergency & Development Programming

Cross-faith humanitarian response and social cohesion: Zamboanga Amores Interfaith and World Vision

Introduction

In 2000, World Vision in the Philippines (known as World Vision Development Foundation) started its Mindanao Peacebuilding programme. This engagement led to the creation of the Mindanao Interfaith Dialogue. Among its stated purposes was to support social cohesion through initiatives promoting peace and tolerance, bringing communities closer together. As part of the Mindanao Peacebuilding programme, a forum of faith leaders in Zamboanga City was established as a space for interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Zamboanga Amores Interfaith (Amores) was legally registered as a non-profit entity in 2011.

World Vision closed its development programmes in Zamboanga in 2012. However, even after the closure of its programmes, World Vision maintained communication with Amores and continued to encourage Christian-Muslim dialogue in the city. On 9 September 2013, the Muslim Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF),

while seeking recognition by the government, attacked Zamboanga City. A three-week battle ensued, resulting in the occupation and subsequent evacuation of several of the city's neighbourhoods, with limited movement in and out of those neighbourhoods. Although separatist movements have long been active on Mindanao, and clashes were not uncommon, this was the first time in the memory of Zamboanga's citizens that such a conflict happened.

When World Vision mobilised emergency assistance to the city, Amores quickly mobilised as World Vision's response partner and began sending World Vision regular updates about the situation. They helped to facilitate rapid distribution, coordinated assistance and liaised with local crisis management personnel. Amores also engaged in peacebuilding and reconciliation work by, for example, pleading with their neighbours and congregants not to join rebel groups and encouraging dialogue throughout the crisis.

The World Vision Development Foundation sees its pre-existing relationship with Amores as a key to its success when responding to the urgent humanitarian needs of civilians affected by the siege. It was also an important element when promoting social cohesion and

a return to stability in the months following the crisis. This research sought to identify and analyse the role of Amores and of World Vision in the 2013 response and in subsequent social cohesion work.



'At first I was "allergic" to the idea that people of other faiths could be together. So, I didn't talk; I just observed. Why "allergic"? Because I come from a very religious background, I'm not used to being with non-Muslims. Why did I go then? Curiosity got the best of me. I went to see for myself, why Muslims [and] Catholics were doing this. It was more about proving why.' – Imam, Muslim member of Amores

Key findings

Developing a locally owned, relevant message

Since World Vision closed its development programmes in Zamboanga, Amores is more reliant on its members' personal and religious networks and is proactive in seeking ways to work with local government. On one hand, this independence from World Vision's institutional support limits Amores' ability to do all the activities they want to do. On the other hand, this independence ensures that Amores functions as a grassroots organisation. Amores members are proud of their grassroots focus. As a local network, they created a model of interfaith acceptance that both challenged and made sense to their fellow faith leaders as well as to other members of their respective communities. Further, they established a spin-off organisation,

Jabu Jabu, that supports birth registration of children so that they can register for school and other services. They responded to an important contextually relevant need that supports the integration of vulnerable families into community life.

Facilitating humanitarian response

In the Zamboanga response, religious leaders contributed to the humanitarian effort by facilitating coordination with other stakeholders, especially local government and members of civil society. They offered psycho-social support through spiritual care in a culturally and contextually appropriate way. Additionally, they helped humanitarian actors identify and access those families and individuals most in need of aid.

'Doubts were rising at the time, and people couldn't see eye to eye. Religious leaders could stand up and say that interfaith [initiatives are] still the best solution. People were hopeless, and religious leaders could help build their resilience with the principle that loving one another is a command from God. Zamboanga City is pluralistic: You [can] throw an issue out [and] it will spread overnight. So [utilise] religious leaders.' – Peace Education Coordinator at partner non-governmental organisation





'The church was totally burned. Even after this, as a member of Amores Interfaith Forum, my love for other faiths was not shaken; maybe it was even stronger. Zamboanga Amores Interfaith became active and strong, for one reason: *amores* – love for God and for one another. These are our core values and the two great commandments. If not a member, I may have been very angry against Muslims. But instead, I encouraged my church members against anger. They were very angry and bitter. But maybe they listened because they saw an example in me and my reaction.' – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores

Amores was active in the response, though most of its members were busy caring for their own congregants and families. They collected and distributed donations, recruited volunteers, and facilitated World Vision's response in a number of ways. They also expanded the activities of Jabu Jabu, registering the births of hundreds of children who had been displaced to the evacuation centres. This birth registration ensured that these children had access to humanitarian assistance.

World Vision's response included distribution of hygiene kits and establishment of Child Friendly Spaces (CFS). It was a collaborative effort that built upon its extensive network of pre-existing relationships in Zamboanga. Religious leaders who were members of Amores played a key role in facilitating, introducing and offering a legal legitimacy to World Vision's response. Once activities began, Amores' members were present at all World Vision-organised events, which included distributions and CFS activities. Throughout the emergency and afterwards, Amores' members promoted messages of love, forgiveness and acceptance.

Sustainability and broader impact

As a network, Amores continues to work to counter discrimination in a number of ways. These include peace education and sharing their experiences. Important in this sharing are examples of cross-faith collaboration. These examples illustrate that Amores members dialogue to learn from one another rather than persuade one another to change beliefs.

As conflict broke out in other parts of Mindanao Island, especially in Marawi in 2017, members of Amores have contributed their stories, experiences and perspectives with religious leaders elsewhere. This was facilitated through the Mindanao Interfaith Forum, which World Vision helped establish and of which Amores is a member.

Amores has done some work in youth engagement and hopes to expand its efforts. According to partners, more effort needs to be made to engage youth in interfaith dialogue, passing on both the vision and the wisdom of experience.

Lessons learned

Amores Interfaith Forum has come into its own as a grassroots organisation whose sum is greater than its parts. It is a network that supports social cohesion throughout the city of Zamboanga through peace education, birth registration and offering an example of peaceful interfaith coexistence. In Zamboanga, Amores now works with a variety of government and civil society partners as well as faith-based organisations. As a group, members are able to contribute significantly to humanitarian response and offer spiritual nurture based on their own faith during the 2013 crisis. They speak into wider interfaith dialogue and coexistence issues through their participation in the Mindanao Interfaith Forum and other networking spaces facilitated by World Vision.



'Our role as Amores in the response was spirituality. Would people trust me? I didn't do any harm. Muslim groups were suspect, with their dialect and their religion, [and wondered] what they should do about the situation. We talked to them about responsibility within our religion. Also, they were concerned to accept relief goods because [the supplies] were un-Islamic, so we declared them halal.' – Imam, Muslim member of Amores

World Vision launched an important space for interfaith dialogue through Amores and played an important role in both creating and developing Amores. The partnership is of mutual benefit, and as a result it expands the reach and quality of World Vision's programmes and strengthens Amores. Following are examples:

- **Vision casting to a young interfaith forum:** World Vision contributed to the establishment of Zamboanga Amores Interfaith through vision casting and messaging to members of Amores, challenging them to recruit other faith leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue. It also trained Amores members as trainers for peace and parenting workshops. The result was that Amores was able to develop as an entity with a specific and important expertise to offer to communities across Zamboanga. In addition, World Vision benefited from Amores members conducting spiritual nurture activities in communities where World Vision worked, including Amores' members leading devotions for World Vision staff.
- **Addressing a specific practical community need:** World Vision asked Amores members, in particular Muslim faith leaders, to help address a very specific logistical problem: the prevalence of Muslim children whose births were never registered. In collaboration with local government, Amores supported World Vision in developing a process for birth registration. Initially, this helped World Vision register more children for sponsorship. However, Amores adopted and expanded on this idea, creating a new charity that is still registering children today.

- **Mutually beneficial partnership in response:** World Vision engaged Amores in its humanitarian response, which expanded the reach of Amores members. It allowed them to support a greater number and diversity of affected families. This also gave World Vision access and legitimacy. By working through Amores' legal registration status and by having respected faith leaders present at its activities, World Vision increased its effectiveness.
- **Continued relationship and capacity building:** World Vision continues to engage Amores Interfaith Forum in broader networks, most notably the Mindanao Interfaith Forum. This presents an ongoing capacity-building and relationship-building opportunity for Amores. It is empowering as they share their experiences and lessons learned with other faith leaders in Mindanao and elsewhere. World Vision also benefits from this as Amores is one of the more established and developed interfaith networks with which it partners. Amores is able to strengthen World Vision's achievement of its interfaith objectives region wide.
- **Power of pre-existing relationships:** World Vision responded to the crisis in Zamboanga effectively because, even though it no longer operated in the city, it still had a relationship with Amores. Its continued relationships with Amores and other partners in Mindanao also allowed World Vision, along with its partners, to respond to the crisis in Marawi.