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2018

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## The Future Can Be Better: Young People And The Marawi Siege

Jayeel S. Cornelio<sup>1</sup> and Septrin John A. Calamba<sup>2</sup>

Young people are deeply implicated in the Marawi siege. Many commentaries and studies view them in either of two ways. On the one hand, they are the sector characterized as most vulnerable to radicalization. Researchers focus on the factors that lead them to violent extremism (Casey and Pottebaum 2018). But on the other hand, they are also characterized as passive victims needing relief and protection (Haynes and Tanner 2015). While these depictions may be legitimate in their own ways, they contradict each other. They are either perpetrators of violence or its victims. But they also share important similarities. These depictions derive from deep concerns about the wellbeing of young people in conflict situations. This sentiment is valid because they ought to be enjoying their youth and discovering their talents and abilities at school.

And yet both depictions also share a problematic assumption. That they are either prone to violence or victims of conflict frames young people as a social problem at the same time, taking them as a social problem evidently carries a moral undertone: While some may be driven by a sense of righteous indignation, some others may be carried away by their ignorance (Hughes 2016). These frames, taken together, are blind to the youths' potential contributions as effective agents of change, especially in post-conflict reconstruction.

Research shows that although it may force young people to take on adult roles for which they are unprepared, conflict does not necessarily cripple their abilities to see into the future (Schwartz 2010). They do have stories and aspirations to share, some of which remain rooted in idealism and hope that tomorrow will be better. This is the basis of our ongoing study that documents the narratives of young people before, during, and after the Marawi siege. Our project, funded by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), involves interviewing Muslim, Christian, and Lumad youths. We are also working with Reemar Alonsagay, a recent graduate of MSU – Marawi. We wish to spell out the importance of our research and some of our findings in this Perspectives piece.

### Young people as a social problem?

It is important for stakeholders to tap into young people's narratives during reconstruction. Embedded in these accounts are how young people see themselves in relation to conflict and its causes and how the community can respond. While they have their rights and needs that must be addressed, young people go beyond the immediate concerns. They are capable of making calculations about the prospects of peace in their community and whether they would want to make significant contributions to make it happen. This is where the structural support of civil society and the state comes in. Reconstruction has to make peace convincing for them by making them part of the sociopolitical discussions about the future (Schwartz, 2010).

But because young people are depicted as a social problem, their input in the reconstruction process is generally neglected. At the same time, technocrats who are preoccupied with physical infrastructure dominate reconstruction (Ranada, 2018). What youths have to say is ignored. According to Ahmad, a 19-year-old student from Wato, "the youth have the time, power, energy, and knowledge. The participation of the youth must be visible." But he also claims that "we are never consulted... Also, I am now hesitant to attend forums because what happens usually is that after the event, there will be no implementation. Our participation is wasted."

In our view, involving young people is crucial to long-term reconstruction, development, and peace. This is because the success of a peace process depends on "whether the next generations accept or reject it, how they are socialized during the peace process, and their perceptions of what that peace process has achieved" (McEvoy-Levy, 2001, 5).

Their exclusion from the process does not only reinforce their status as a social problem. The long-term implication is on whether reconstruction is worthwhile for the youths who will one day become leaders. Their experiences at this point "will affect their understandings of peace and conflict and, therefore, have the potential to guide the national trajectory toward either reconciliation or renewed conflict" (Schwartz, 2010, 2).

### Aspirations

So, what are their aspirations? And are they pessimistic? These young people have compelling visions about Marawi. Based on their narratives, they recognize the lessons from the devastations but continue to aspire for a peaceful and developed city. For them, Marawi is their home and source of identity. Ahmad echoes this point: "Marawi City has been part of my life and identity. Since it was devastated, our identity seems lost as well. Marawi is our identity as Meranaos." Their participation therefore in the physical reconstruction of Marawi is vital for reclaiming their identity and home. Marawi may not be as appealing to outsiders, but its young people still hope to live back in the city as they had lived before the siege.

In these narratives, we observe that their aspirations involve socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects. First, our Muslim interlocutors desire that Marawi be a "true" Islamic City. To them this means that cultural

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and religious practices are faithfully observed. Specifically, they want the city to be peaceful and free from criminality. According to Adira, a young housewife and evacuee in Saguiaran, "I wish there are no more conflicts, illegal drugs, gambling." Second, rehabilitation must bring back livelihood activities. Observing the present conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs), young people are aware that access to social services especially livelihood is a problem. This is a reality that confronts Adira who lost her source of income during the Marawi siege. Third, our youth interlocutors aspire for effective rehabilitation that will not be hampered by corruption and political loyalties. Aware of the delays that have made it impossible for IDPs to return to the city, these young people insist that politicians must be held accountable. They hope for efficient infrastructures such as roads and proper waste management. But the reconstruction, in their view, must respect the identity of the city. For Benjamin, a Christian, Marawi "must be developed, and politicians must stop doing things against the culture and religion." Benjamin reacts not only to the inefficiencies surrounding rehabilitation but also to media reports that outsiders are planning to turn the entire city into a tourist destination at the expense of local values and practices (Ranada, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Listening to the aspirations of the youths in Marawi, we see them as active citizens who appeal not just to the rebuilders but also one another. In this sense they are neither just victims nor destabilizers. To be sure, they are not technocratic experts but they are aware of their circumstances and desire that they get better. They have lived and continue to live through dire circumstances. They therefore deserve the attention from civil society and the state. Youths are not necessarily the social problem. They can be solutions to the more fundamental social problems at hand including conflict, corruption, and social exclusion.

We do not wish, however, to romanticize this point. While marginalization and deprivation in Marawi are not new for young people, that these issues linger in the reconstruction period can be a source of resentment. The delays are now making them question the prospects of progress in Marawi. What Jenny, a Christian student at MSU-Marawi, has to say is telling: "the present situation of evacuees will only lead to new grievances." This sentiment makes peace fragile. Research shows such factors as political exclusion, economic discrimination, negative stereotypes, and personal experiences of violence may trigger young people's support for violent extremism. (Sterkens, Camacho, and Scheepers 2016).

There are no shortcuts here. Recognizing what youths can offer society is a challenging task not only because they have different ideas. Asking them to come to the table may be an ordeal in itself given that basic needs must first be addressed. And yet opportunities for consultations and development planning must be visible and present. In these encounters, they can tackle post-conflict issues involving what they need, how they ought to be reintegrated, and how they wish to take part in their community's social and political futures (Schwartz, 2010).

In other words, we find it necessary to learn from young people's aspirations for unity, peace, and development. These aspirations are not lost on them. This is an entry point for various stakeholders who are eager in seeing a rehabilitated Marawi where peace is a more viable option than conflict. Making sure that they are heard is the first step toward convincing them that the future can be better.

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