

*I was fortunate enough to visit the Philippines in January 2011 through the ICRC Young Reporter Competition. My goal was to produce materials to teach myself, my mum and you about the lives of youth who are coping with conflict situations, as seen through the work of the ICRC and local Red Cross chapters, especially in the Mindanao region.*

*Over 12 days, I visited communities where the internally displaced have settled, a prosthetics centre, different chapters of the Philippine Red Cross, schools and impoverished barangays (villages). I met with ICRC beneficiaries, young activists, project planning professionals and local legends. Needless to say, those 12 days were filled with countless learning opportunities that I am happy to be able to share with you.*



*Some of the youngest ICRC beneficiaries in the Philippines.*

## **Youth and Armed Conflict: *Pinoy* Perspectives**

*by Mariel García Montes*

Let's start at the very beginning.

### **What is it like to be a young person in the Philippines?**

I'm no social scientist, and I didn't spend months mingling with Filipino youth (or *Pinoys*, as they call themselves) to understand their ways, so I can't answer that question comprehensively. However, the statistics are telling: the Philippines is a country of youth.



*A Filipino teenager checks his mobile phone.*

Over half the population of the Philippines is under 25 years of age.<sup>1</sup> Sixty percent are aged 29 or under, and 70% are under 35 years of age. While Western countries worry about having enough younger workers to support an ageing population, the Philippines needs to focus on educating and supporting its abundant youth.

Think of the big youth market in the Philippines: 3 out of every 10 people are teenagers or young adults. Now, that's an incentive for young pop celebrities and clothes designers to invest in marketing there.

Moreover, a market-research survey<sup>2</sup> shows that *Pinoy* youth are heavy users of technology. Thirty percent say they can't live without their TVs. Almost three-quarters have a DVD player at home. Three out of 10 are active bloggers; Web pages like micro-blogging site Plurk (<http://www.plurk.com>) have sections for *Pinoy*s.

Filipino youth are mobile technologically and geographically. Cell phone use is widespread, and Filipinos on average have the biggest number of contacts on their mobile phones among all Asians. Moreover, 10% of the urban population aged 15 to 29 was composed of migrants when it was surveyed in 2004. This figure increased to 19% in the capital region.<sup>3</sup> Even without internal conflict, the proportion of migrants may well increase as the population grows; at its present 1.8% annual rate, the population could double by 2050.

### **What is it like being a young *Pinoy* amid conflict?**

The Philippines is a country of contrasts. There are those *Pinoy* youth who enjoy weekly shopping trips fuelled by American fast food, and those who live in a conflict zone on less than two US dollars a day. Many certainly don't have easy access to iPods, let alone college. At the same time, they are not disconnected from more glamorous lifestyles. They know it's all around them, in the same country they live in – just not in their hands.

I will focus on the young people of Mindanao, where I got to see the work of the ICRC first-hand and meet its beneficiaries.

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<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office of the Philippines, 2007 Census of Population (<http://www.census.gov.ph/data/sectordata/datapop.html>).

<sup>2</sup> The fifth Synovate Young Asians study (see <http://www.synovate.com>).

<sup>3</sup> S. Gultiano, "Age-structure and urban migration of youth in the Philippines," paper presented at the CICRED Seminar on Age-Structural Transitions, Paris, 23-26 February 2004. Available at: <http://www.cicred.org/Eng/Seminars/Details/Seminars/Popwaves/PopwavesGultiano.pdf>.

What kind of conflict do young people in Mindanao experience? The short answer is – it's a long story. The roots of the conflict date back hundreds of years, and it takes the form of clan disputes, rebellions against the Philippine Government and sporadic violence. Different interests and world views influence the parties involved, and I couldn't possibly do a fair job of explaining them. So I won't try.

Instead, I'll rely on personal stories to show you the challenges people there are facing.

### **The effects of armed conflict on youth**



*A crowded settlement on Mindanao, the Philippines.*

The most obvious effect of conflict on youth is that they can be wounded, or have to deal with injuries to relatives and friends.



*Arriving at Davao Jubilee Center, a place of hope for injured conflict victims.*

That's why we visited the Davao Jubilee Center, which receives ICRC support for its prosthetics programme.

Jubilee aims to help disabled people have an independent lifestyle, to "go back to life," as some there put it. They do this by conducting hearing and vision screening, providing hearing aids, producing custom prostheses and training their recipients.

The ICRC helps conflict victims through rehabilitation, and we interviewed two recipients of prostheses. Both lost a leg because of gunshot wounds while working on their farms.

They don't know who shot them. What they do know, though, is the feeling of helplessness amputees experience when they realize that their lives will change fundamentally, and not for the better.

They also know how difficult the first training session with the new prosthesis is. Things we take for granted, like our centre of balance, need to be relearned during a two-week rehabilitation programme. But the amputees say that, at that point, the helplessness they felt begins to fade, giving way to hope.

The people we met are middle-aged, but Jubilee also treats much younger conflict victims. In fact, the coordinator of the physical rehabilitation programme, Chona Serra, talks about a five-year-old boy who was both orphaned and made a double amputee by the conflict. She says he was the most memorable victim they treated.

Ms. Serra says, "Words cannot explain what it's like to see happiness after sorrow."

The local community appreciates Jubilee for providing rehabilitation programmes that take psychosocial factors into account. In part, it's about being able to walk, but it's also about going back to normal life. It's about learning to smile again.



*Putting the finishing touches on a custom prosthesis.*





*A five-year-old amputee tries out his new prosthetic legs, aided by Ms. Chona Serra.*

*Photo credit: ICRC/Albert Madrazo*

But what about other consequences of life amid conflict?

#### **Reconnecting families with their loved ones in detention**

During the chaos of conflict, there's an increased risk of young people or their families being detained. This is where the ICRC family visit programme comes in.

We met with two women whose husbands were detained far from home as a result of the conflict. The ICRC helps these women to visit their husbands up to four times a year.

The first woman, who has two daughters, said that what she finds hardest is having to support her family alone. Among other things, she weaves nipa leaves into roofing mats for 30 Philippine pesos per each mat. That's less than one US dollar for several days' work. Needless to say, her daughters can't experience the relatively affluent, urban lifestyles of some Filipino youth.



*The ICRC is helping this woman to visit her husband in prison.*

The other woman, a mother of four, decided to take all of her children to see their father. Since her budget is limited, that means she will only be able to make one visit per year – and because he's in a high-security prison, the visit will last only two hours, and they will have no contact with him outside that time.

When we asked these women what they desired most, they didn't talk about possessions, or even stability. Their wish, and that of their children, is simply to see their family reunited.

The ICRC not only helps wives visit their husbands and children their fathers, it also helps parents visit their children in prison.

But being separated from their families is only one of the ways in which conflict affects children. Even more basic is the effect conflict has on children's access to education and food.

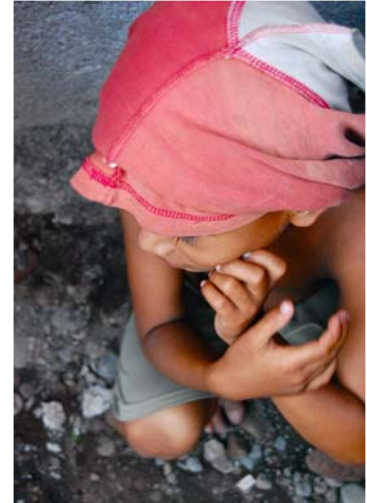
### Education amid conflict

When conflict erupts, communities relocate in a hurry, taking whatever they can carry to a new settlement, far from home, where there are often no services. Here they have to start a new life from scratch.

School is often an early casualty of displacement. Families have other things to worry about, such as staying alive and finding food. To learn about this, we visited communities where the displaced settled.

In one place, children dropped out of school immediately, and could only return after two women organized independent schooling, aided by a non-governmental organization (NGO) in the region.

Those youngsters are now getting an education, but the situation is harder for older youth. There are often no high schools, and even where they exist, classes are overcrowded and under-equipped. It's hard to teach basic computer skills (so that young people can get office jobs, for example) with just one old computer for a hundred students.



*Adjusting to new surroundings can be difficult for displaced children.*

Older youth often can't enrol at a university because they cannot obtain a high-school diploma. Those who do graduate and go on to university may find it hard to get a quality education because of other obligations, such as helping in a family business, as well as limited resources.

### Food



*When families are displaced, schooling is often interrupted.*

When conflict hits rural areas, people are forced to leave their farms, losing both their income and their source of food. They cannot harvest that year's crop, or bring their *carabao* (the water buffalo that helps on rice plantations) or sacks of seeds with them. On top of that, populations have to find available land; usually, that means virgin ground, which needs to be cleared and cultivated.

A collective effort is needed to produce food for everyone. These communities receive support from different organizations, including the ICRC, but under such austere conditions, everybody needs to work on the land every day.

The ICRC assesses the community's needs. What are the basics of their diet? What are their skills – do they fish, raise cattle, or only grow plants? What other support is available? What type of farming is the land best suited to? The assistance provided by the ICRC depends on the answers. Communities may be given fish stocks to repopulate over-fished rivers, or seeds and materials to grow plants for long-term nourishment.

Big projects are being implemented to make farming more efficient. This is where distribution of the legendary kuliglig fits in: these tilling machines can make farming a much easier task.



*These freshly dug peanuts are one of the products from the seeds provided by the ICRC to these communities.*

In the meantime, some people receive food aid. It's hard to work under the sun for hours every day when you have nothing to eat.



*Somebody needs to make sure the crops are ready to be eaten. This sweet potato definitely was!*



*Tilling machines (kuligligs) make farming more efficient.*

## **Identity and aspirations**

Teenage angst can be hard enough without the added pressures of conflict. In our community visits, we heard many personal stories about this issue.

For some displaced youth, it was embarrassing to relocate because they thought they would be disliked by their new neighbours. Although they eventually adjusted to their surroundings, this fear led to isolation initially.

When asked about her future plans, Rowena told us that what she most wants is to help her parents. She helps out around the house, in her family's business, and in school, where she assists in teaching math, her favourite subject.



In the future, she wants to work abroad so that she can send money back home. She's not alone in this; many Filipino youth believe that working overseas can help alleviate their financial situation. Rowena thinks that the strength she has gained as a conflict victim – having to trek through the mud to find a new place to live – will aid her in such endeavours.

Many other youth make a different decision: seeking a better life, they marry early. Then, once there are children to take care of, there's no time left for education.

Other teenagers, however, have much in common with their counterparts in the rest of the Philippines, or indeed, the world: Rowena says she is a fan of the national pastime, singing. Another teen from the same community joined a local dance competition with his friends.



*Like teenagers everywhere, young people on Mindanao care about how others see them.*



*Rowena hopes to find a job abroad to help support her family.*

With the cash prize they won, he bought himself some fashionable shoes. His group's next stop? A popular TV talent show.

Yes, displaced populations are not immune to the influence of popular culture. They may have no TV at home, but teenagers use their phones to take pictures, and they care about their appearance. Perhaps surprisingly, all the teens we met own mobile phones so they can stay in touch with friends and parents. If you think that their parents don't give them a hard time, the way parents in Western countries would ("Don't text while you're eating," for example), it may interest you to know that late-night calls are a no-no!

Youth who have been displaced by conflict also care what people who aren't going through the same experience think of them.

A young Philippine Red Cross volunteer from Cotabato told us he was sad to see that, in the rest of the Philippines, people from conflict areas in Mindanao are often stereotyped as rebels and terrorists. He experienced this first-hand when he went away to study. "I tried to help people realize that there was more to life in the region than they thought," he said.

## **Optimism and action**

Can the long-running conflict in Mindanao ever be resolved? Many adults will tell you, absolutely not; it will go on for generations. And who can blame them for being pessimistic about such a complex situation?

But youth think differently. Problems can be solved because *they will* solve them. To find a happy medium between pessimism and naïveté, let's hear the thoughts of those youth who are working for change.

We had the opportunity to meet youth brimming with enthusiasm at an event held at Midsayap Southern Christian College, near Cotabato City.

The discussion centred on how to achieve a solution, not whether it was possible to do so. That question was never even raised. Surprisingly, although the event was simply called a "youth forum," with no indication of what topics would be covered, the entire discussion revolved around peace-building.

All of the young social advocates there had been touched by conflict. They themselves had been evacuees, or had known friends who had never come back to school, and they had certainly seen their opportunities diminished. Nobody needed to tell them that the day's topic was peace-building – they knew it implicitly.



*Youth bring fresh perspectives to the debate on ending the conflict.*

But these young people aren't just talking about conflict; they're working to eradicate it. In their communities, through the arts, sports, and education programmes, they are striving to develop a culture of peace among youth.



*Aiza spoke about a sports camp she worked on, and that helped foster interreligious understanding.*

One of them is Aiza, a talented 20-year-old (see photo below), who worked on a project called "*Bola hindi bala*" (Balls, not bullets). This programme brings displaced children of different faiths to a sports camp to provide them with psychosocial support and to help break down barriers between religions.

The projects discussed in Midsayap were big and ambitious, involving hundreds of youth. They included initiatives like the Shoe Box Operation, in which primary-school pupils fill boxes with school supplies for their peers in conflict zones.

### **The Red Cross Youth**

Among youth working to make the Philippines a better place, the Red Cross Youth (RCY) looms large. So much could be said about them; here are some highlights to help you understand their role in the Philippine Red Cross (PRC)

I had an opportunity to meet members of the RCY council of the Davao City chapter of the PRC. They are genuine all-rounders who work in all types of contexts, from the radio room, where they respond to emergencies, to teaching first aid in crowded classrooms (as you can see in the photos below).





In the photo at right, members of the Davao City chapter the Philippine Red Cross Youth respond with giggles when a photographer tries to catch them unaware.



left, the same group looks more composed when they've had a chance to make sure their hair is in place.

We also met members of the RCY Council of the Cotabato chapter of the PRC (see photo at right). These youth work in the field, distributing aid and providing psychological debriefings to disaster victims. Many also have first-aid training.



Lastly, we met members of the RCY Council of the Rizal chapter of the PRC in Metro Manila. We got to see one of their famous "*barangay* invasions": they go into different villages, or *barangays*, to conduct peer-to-peer counselling on such topics as substance abuse, preventing sexually transmitted diseases, and other topics of relevance to youth (see photos below).



*Barangay* invasions involve visits to local schools...

... chatting with local teenagers...



... (even the girl hiding in the depths of the *sari-sari*, or convenience store)...



... and generally being there to listen to local youth and remind them of the importance of their decisions.

But does their work have an impact?

“Yes” is the immediate answer from their older colleagues. The Philippine Red Cross headquarters in Manila estimates that the Red Cross Youth make up 75% of the Red Cross volunteers in the entire country. Think about it: three quarters of the volunteers distributing aid, expertly managing blood donations and raising awareness about disaster prevention are youth.

Adults take pride in the hard and independent work of these young people. The legendary Mr Antonio Uy, who has worked with the Philippine Red Cross since 1956, says that one of his favourite moments was seeing young volunteers working alone in the warehouse, without needing to be told what to do, during a disaster relief operation.

These young people not only can be, but already are, the largest source of manpower of an institution as big as the Philippine Red Cross.

But perhaps not everybody sees them in the best light.



## Yes, we can

Despite all the work that they are doing, and the fact that they make up over half the population, youth in the Philippines seem to have a general sense that their beliefs and actions are not always respected by their elders.

Youth from Rizal say that, in their *barangay* invasions and other programmes, adults sometimes intervene when they are talking with other youth. “They think we aren’t qualified to do what we’re doing; they don’t trust our preparation,” said one PRCY member.

That’s why youth in the Philippines say, “Yes, we can.” And here, according to them, are the reasons why they should be trusted:



*Young activists bring real skills and knowledge to their work.*

**Because of their passion.** These youth spend hours, probably months, each year working to improve their community.

**Because of the support they receive.** They don’t have to start youth action from scratch; programmes like the Red Cross Youth give them the tools they need to focus on real work.

**Because of the materials, training programmes and resources** they’ve created and shared with others, from newsletters to manuals.

**Because they can talk to other young people as peers.** Sometimes that’s what’s needed to discuss issues relevant to youth.



*Young people know what issues are most important to their peers.*

**Because they know what inspires other youth** to become volunteers. After all, they, too, once needed motivation.

**Because they have knowledge!** Apart from the training they receive in their volunteer work, they bring the knowledge they have acquired in medical or nursing school or in other areas of higher education.

Volunteers always need more training and better tools; beneficiaries need to have their stage of life considered in project planning. Filipino youth in general need support from adults to cope with the challenges they already face.



*Philippine Red Cross Youth work with their elders to improve things in their communities.*

It is inspiring to see that, even for those most affected by conflict, there are adults listening to their needs and trying to make things better for them. It is also inspiring to see these youth accept their role in creating change in a responsible way.

Let's make sure that support is never lacking for them.

Photo credits: ICRC/Mariel García Montes