

# ***Disrupting conflict strings in sub-national contexts: Experience from Muslim Mindanao, Philippines<sup>1</sup>***

***Nikki Philline C. de la Rosa<sup>2</sup>***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Global experience suggests that declines in rebellion-related conflict can lead to an intensification of transition-induced horizontal violence between clans, tribes, political elites, and criminal entrepreneurs. However, there are few sources of robust data that can test this relationship at the subnational level. This paper offers fresh evidence of the phenomena of transition-induced violence through the analysis of conflict strings in the case of subnational conflict in the southern provinces of Muslim Mindanao.

Violent conflict between Moro insurgents and the Philippine state over the past forty years is the imagery often used to portray the lawlessness and violence that plagues Muslim Mindanao. Yet rebellion-related vertical conflict in the area is also accompanied by horizontal conflict between rival families and clans, between rebel factions, and between identity-based groups and communities. Data from the **Bangsamoro<sup>3</sup> Conflict Monitoring System** (BCMS Box 1) reveals the significant multi-causal nature of violence and the phenomenon of conflict strings in the region. Data harvested from police and media reports over a three-year period (2011-2013) and encoded in the BCMS database indicate that violence erupts from a multitude of causes that can evolve into violent strings and morph victims into perpetrators, and clan feuding into intra or inter insurgent violence.

Conflict strings refer to episodes of violence arising from a discrete incident with singular or multiple causes. A single incident is then reproduced through violent confrontations that come in sets, oftentimes the result of clan feuding or revenge killings. Yet they can also emerge when the singular source of violence at the outset triggers other issues or causes of conflict. For example, politically-motivated conflict can induce an episode of violence that fuses with shadow economy triggers or ethnic and clan identity issues as it spirals out of control.

The multi-causal nature of conflict and the endurance of clan feuding has been the subject of earlier studies of violent conflict. These studies help explain the phenomenon of violent strings, but they are not the focus of this paper. The question is why the search for solutions to violent conflict is often based on an analysis of the causes behind the eruption of violence, rather than the triggers that enables violence to endure.

I argue that violent incidents cannot be examined as discrete events isolated from other causes and related events that enable conflict to change shape and endure even after a successful political settlement. It is important to examine violent conflict in terms of its propensity to turn singular events into episodes of violence. Analyzing a sample of violent episodes from the BCMS database also enables us to devise nuanced yet effective conflict management strategies that can actually, interrupt, disrupt, or cut these violent strings.

The paper presents descriptive statistics on conflict episodes in terms of which causes has the highest propensity to spin into violent strings and inflict the highest human cost. Conflict deaths, injuries, and displacement are used to determine human costs or the magnitude of violent conflict. Specific examples of conflict strings are mapped out to illustrate how a single conflict incident can spin-off to a major episode of violence involving state and non-state armed groups. Finally, the data indicates the multiple rule systems and actor identities involved in the conflict.

Is it possible to disrupt conflict strings? Hybrid processes that involve the collaboration of state and non-state actors will be shown to highlight the actors involved and the critical elements at each stage of a conflict episode that determines if conflict will die out or continue. We harness some lessons from game theory to examine the negotiation processes and instruments that may produce collective solutions to violence, or the reverse—collective mobilization for violent conflict.

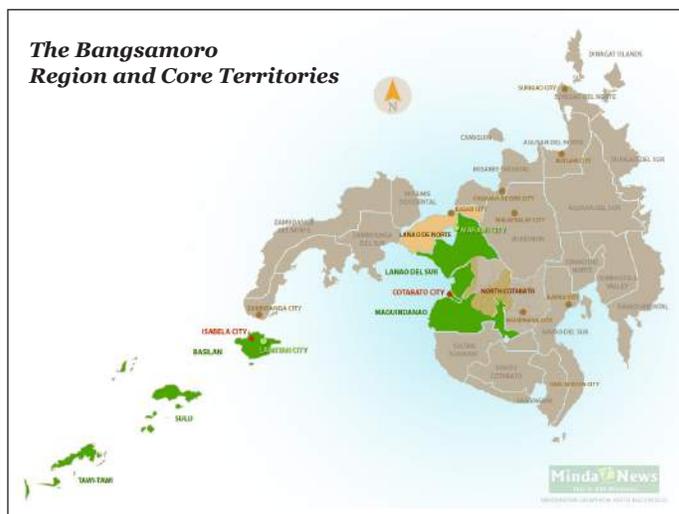


Image from Mindanews: <http://www.mindanews.com/peace-process/2012/10/11/from-rag-to-armm-to-bangsamoro-salamat-hashim-would-have-approved-of-bangsamoros-proposed-territory/>, accessed 10 September 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the WHO and University of Cambridge Global Violence Reduction Conference 2014 on 18-19 September 2014, Kings College, Cambridge, UK.

<sup>2</sup> The author is Deputy Country Manager and Head of Mindanao Operations for the Philippines programme of International Alert UK. She has written on agrarian reform, rural development, development aid, shadow economies, and conflict sensitive economic governance. She holds degrees from the University of the Philippines and the London School of Economics.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to the Moro people or Moro nation. It is also the name used to denote the territories that will fall under the proposed new autonomous political entity in Muslim Mindanao.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA LIMITATIONS:

### The Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS)

The BCMS is a sub-national conflict database that traces the manifestations, triggers, actors, and costs of violent conflict in Muslim Mindanao—yielding a nuanced understanding of sources of violence that can contribute to the design of conflict prevention strategies and more broadly, in delivering a more resilient peace in fragile conflict-affected contexts. It is a sub-national conflict database that helps fill the gap in adequate, reliable, and timely conflict data that informs the understanding of violent conflict dynamics.

The BCMS taps the data-gathering and analytical capabilities of local academic partner institutions covering different parts of Muslim Mindanao. Main sources of data are regional and provincial police and media reports. Violence is used as a proxy indicator in determining incidents that will be included in the database. Violent conflict refers to incidents where two or more parties use violence to settle misunderstandings and grievances and/or expand their collective interests, e.g., social, economic, political resources, and power.

Data on strings was harvested from the BCMS electronic database for years 2011-2013, detected through four (4) signifiers: actor, causes, location, and conflict resolution efforts. The encoded monitoring instruments contained machine-generated incident and reference numbers that could connect related incidents using the signifiers above and produce image files of each incident report to ensure evidence-based recording.

Conflict incidents are encoded in a standardised monitoring instrument and uploaded in an electronic database. Incidents are categorised into six (6) conflict causes including political, identity-based, resource-based, shadow economy, governance, and extra-judicial issues. These general causes are further disaggregated into fifty two (52) sub-categories.

Incident classifications reflect the multi-causal character of conflict. A single incident may have two or more causes. For example, there are violent incidents associated with clan feuding, electoral competition, and illicit drugs. In these cases, the incident will be recorded in multiple categories. Hence, in the BCMS database the total numbers of causes do not equal the total number of incidents.

Not all cases of conflict are publicly reported for various reasons, not least because of cultural norms or administrative reasons.<sup>4</sup> This is partly addressed by a multi-stakeholder validation process. Members of the validation groups include different key individuals from the local level with distinctive expertise to examine and validate conflict data produced by BCMS, generate unreported conflict data, determine unknown causes of conflict, identify strings, and enrich analysis. Other data sources are explored and assessed to comprehensively capture incidences of *rido*<sup>5</sup> (clad feud/violence) and further trace conflict strings and morphing.

### Conflict strings and morphing

#### *300 families displaced due to encounter*

The following account is an example of a conflict string that occurred over a period of nine days leading to the several deaths and the displacement on hundreds.

*On May 13, 2012, an armed group led by Commander Dagadas who was part of the group of MILF Commander Sagadan allegedly harassed the group of MNLF Commander Menanimbong in Katian, North Cotabato.*

*Three days after the said harassment, on May 16, 2012, the group of Commander Menanimbong had an armed encounter with the groups of Commander Sagadan and Commander Dagadas at Sitio Misalan, NC. One civilian was killed in the gunbattle.*

*Three days later again on May 19, 2012, at around 4pm, Commander Karim Sagadan of the Moro Islamic Liberation front crossed paths again with Commander Teo Menanimbong of the Moro National Liberation Front that resulted in a prolonged gun battle between the two insurgent groups. Seven (7) people were killed and around 300 families were displaced.*

#### *Shooting incidents at Brgy. Tubig Kutab, Siasi, Sulu*

The following police blotter report reveals a case of actor morphing—from victim to perpetrator.

*On May 30, 2013 at around 9:45 in the morning, Madelo Basaning and his wife Elbita Basaning were on their way home on board a banca headed towards Kalangan Island were shot to death by unidentified suspects. The alleged motive was robbery and rido.*

*At around 12:00 PM of the same date, another shooting incident occurred in said place where Ujun Sabtura and Sabirin Sabi were killed and Teuron Jamud and Hanipa Sabturani were wounded. Investigation disclosed that the suspects behind the incident were relatives of the slain couple killed in the morning.*

### Understanding violent strings in Muslim Mindanao

#### *Identity issues, resource-based, and political issues are leading causes violent episodes*

Around five percent (4.5%) of all violent incidents in the BCMS database are interrelated, or are part of conflict episodes. There were fifty-six (56) episodes encompassing 150 violent incidents.

Examining the causes of conflict in a total of 2,758 cases with determined causes reveals that violence associated with shadow economies and extra-judicial issues were the most frequent sources of violence. However, when conflict strings or episodes of violence are ranged against the causes of conflict, we discover that the highest proportion of violent episodes is caused by identity issues (15%). Identity is followed closely by political violence and resource conflicts at twelve percent (12%) and eleven percent (11%) respectively.

**Table 1.** Proportion of strings to conflict causes, 2011-2013

Causal categories	Total number of strings (A)	Total number of causes (B)	Proportion of strings to total (A/B)
Political issues	60	493	12%
Resource issues	7	66	11%
Extra-judicial issues	10	388	3%
Governance issues	5	105	5%
Identity issues	26	168	15%
Shadow economy issues	19	533	4%
Undetermined	23	1234	2%

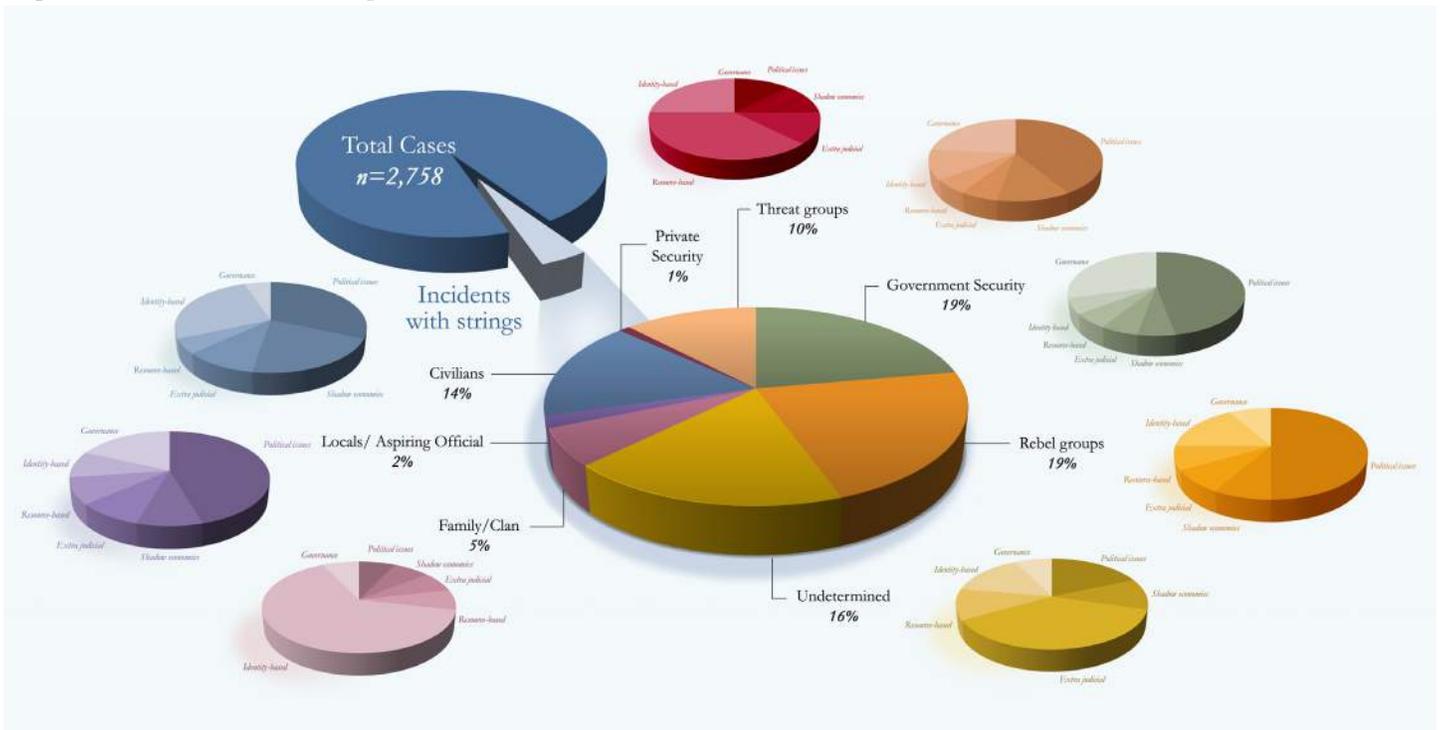
*Causes are multi-causal and recorded, accordingly. Thus, the total will not be the same as the number of incidents.*

The propensity of identity issues to lead to violent conflict supports the hypothesis about the resilience of clan institutions and the corresponding persistence of clan-related violence. Political contestation before, during, and after elections is sustained by the entrenched control of clans over political office. The deadly competition for control over certain aspects of Mindanao's formal and informal economy contains the imprint of local clans as well. Even flashpoints among rebel groups and the State are often a

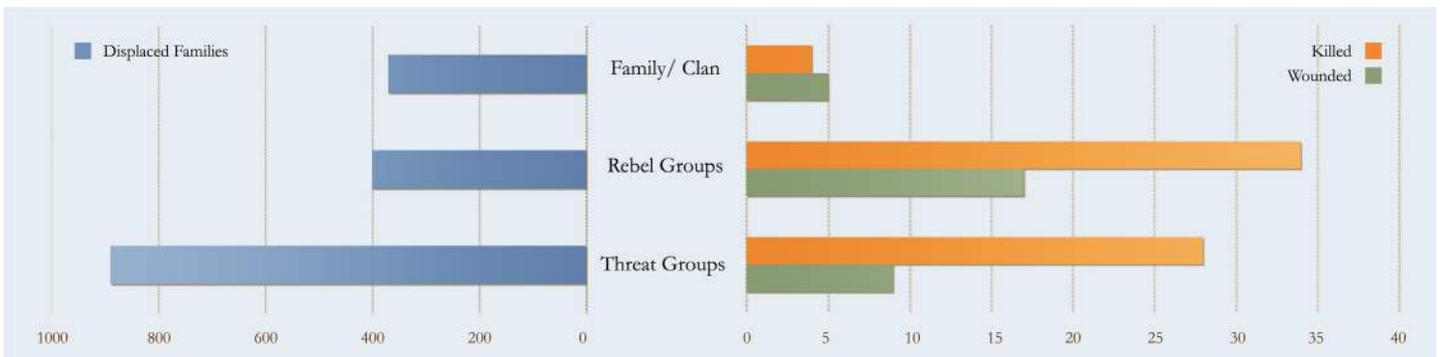
<sup>4</sup> The BCMS database includes many types of violence associated with domestic and gender disputes. However, reports of rape or domestic violence, including honor-related retribution (maratabat) are seldom reported due to local norms. Meanwhile, administrative changes in the reporting of crimes related to women and children due to privacy considerations makes it more difficult to surface such types of data.

<sup>5</sup> *Rido* refers to a state of recurring hostilities between families and kinship groups characterized by a series of retaliatory acts of violence carried out to avenge a perceived affront or injustice (Torres, 2007).

**Figure 1.** Conflict incidents with strings and actors involved, 2011-2013



**Figure 2.** Actors by human cost (killed and wounded), 2011-2013



result of clan conflicts over land and other resources. The imprint of clans is strong in a context where state control is weak or lacking because clans provide social welfare, protection and ensure retribution. The provision of security is most likely organized along family and kinship ties in such contexts (Torres, 2007).

In terms of actors, the rebel groups and government security forces are the main actors involved in these incidents comprising 22 percent of the total, followed by undetermined actors at 18 percent and civilians at 16 percent. Police and media reports indicate many cases of undetermined actors due to the absence of information about the status of actors at the time the incident was recorded. The large number of undetermined actors probably accounts for the lower percentage share of clan-related actors at six percent (6%). The potential underreporting of clan actors warrants another research cycle to review progress reports that may uncover the identify of actors involved in many incidents of violence. The multiplicity of actor identities also needs to be considered. Conflicts may start between two individuals who have clan and rebel group affiliations that eventually escalate and spiral with the involvement of their clans and/or their groups. Actors, unless specified otherwise, are recorded in the database as civilians.

In terms of involvement in conflict causes by actors (See Figure 1), government security troops are heavily involved in political and governance issues while rebel groups in political issues. Civilians are involved in political

and shadow economy issues and undetermined actors in extra-judicial issues such as robbery, humiliation, extortion, among others. Civilians are also involved in political issues, mostly election-related. Not surprisingly, by its character, clans' major involvements are in identity-based conflicts. Similarly, local government executives are mainly involved in political violence.

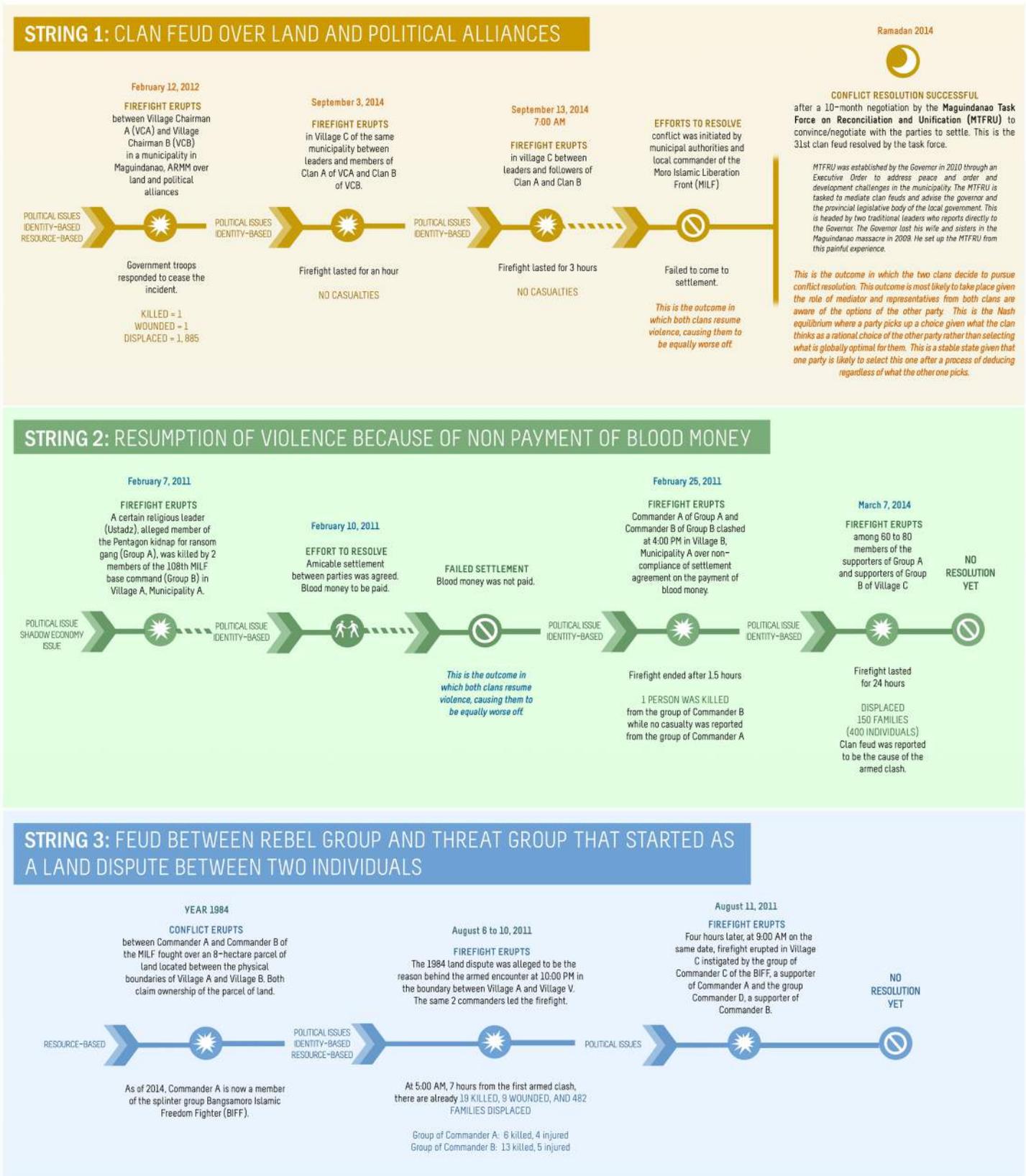
For the period covered, threat groups were more involved in political and governance issues as witnessed in the round of violent attacks orchestrated by the splinter group Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) against government security forces. Threat groups also included the kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) group Pentagon Gang that was involved in strings of violence involving armed clashes with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels. Most of these incidents started as land disputes between two individuals, one was affiliated with the Pentagon Gang, the other with the MILF that morphed into rebellion-related conflict. Private security groups have been involved in violent strings that are resource-based involving land-related disputes in plantation expansion sites and other commercial areas.

Incidents involving rebel groups (See Figure 2) proved to be deadlier compared to the clans. However, threat groups followed closely in terms of number of persons killed, as most conflict strings involved these two groups clashing over land and other resources. Displaced families are higher when threat groups are involved. MILF-related and clan-related incidents indicated almost the same data.

*Time fails to heal old wounds*

A mapping of conflict strings (See Figure 3) shows the potential outcomes that result from violent episodes. With the use of game theory we discover some insights into the causes, actors involved, and the temporal nature of violent strings. The conflict strings map shows that time does not heal conflict and in fact, spreads conflict further if development and peace building actors are unable to disrupt or cut the string at the onset of violence.

**Figure 3.** Conflict strings map



## Conflict resolution as a non-zero-sum game

*The case of a rido or clan feud between two families started as an altercation over ownership of a five hectare piece of land. The feud has already spread to three other municipalities and has been running for 18 years at the time this study was undertaken. By the time the peace mediator came into the picture, three clans were already involved and deaths, injury, and displacement have escalated.*

This rido illustrates a single game with two-options. The process can only result to either a resolution of the conflict (collective agreement for peace) or a resumption of violence (collective mobilization for violence). However, it is a non-zero sum game because all parties benefit from the process without the other party necessarily being worse-off. While there is an optimal scenario wherein the other party gets the highest pay-off in the course of the negotiation, conflict resolution can still have beneficial results or welfare gains for all the parties in the negotiation, including the mediator.

### ACT 1: Conjunction of interests

*It is in the interest of a particular rebel group in central Mindanao to consolidate their mass base. They cannot organize, recruit, and consolidate support if people in the communities are involved in an active feud. The commander of the group decided to mediate a truce through the leaders of the two main clans engaged in violent conflict. He is clear that his group is in a credible position to discipline the clans if they do not agree because they possess more weapons and economic resources. The rebel group's firepower is stronger than the two clans combined, hence it can neutralize armed threats and provide security to both parties if they decide to end their feud. It is also apparent that there are at least three families involved in the feud. The original conflict between the two families needs to be resolved first.*

*The rebel commander met with the two representatives separately. He identified the main interest of each clan leader and used this information to leverage a deal to resolve the conflict. The leader of Clan A is interested to run for office and therefore needs to consolidate his votes. He cannot do so if he is in conflict with one of the big clans in his area of jurisdiction. Clan B cannot sustain the feud with depleting economic resources to fund the conflict, e.g., guns and ammunition. The men cannot engage in productive activities because they cannot work their farms with the constant threat of retaliation and killings.*

In the scenario above it is crucial that the mediator possesses the material force—coercive, economic, and political capacity to strengthen his legitimacy and authority (whether informal or formal) to lead the process.

### ACT 2: Conditional cooperation

*The commander keeps constant tab on each of the clan leaders separately to identify damages, investigate the claims, and agree on blood money for damages incurred. He is the conduit of demands and counter-demands of the two parties who cannot meet face to face until the settlements are agreed upon and commitments are firmed up. Otherwise, violent conflict ensues. Trust and confidence is built and information asymmetry is corrected through this constant engagement process.*

There is conditional cooperation amongst parties; they will cooperate as long as the other does. However, the interaction process can also lead to collective actions for peace or violence based on the calculation of the parties of their individual risk limits, e.g., does the benefit or utility of settling outweigh the cost? Each party undertakes a subjective calculations/assessment of the threats and opportunities involved. All parties retain the capacity to issue and enact threats, including the mediator.

If negotiations collapse, fighting resumes. If not, they proceed to Act 3.

## ACT 3. Collective agreement

*A face to face meeting between representatives of the clans will only be organized by the mediator if demands and blood-money are settled and a collective agreement can be forged. In this case, the mediator had to pay blood money of X amount because there was one claim by Clan A that has not been included in the investigation and settlement process in Act 2. Under a threat of collapse and resumption of violence once the meeting is adjourned, the rebel commander was induced by the situation to settle the claim.*

Blood money facilitates cessation of violence, forgiveness/settlement, and trust-building. It has to be seen beyond its material aspects but as a lever in which to open avenues for restoring relations within the community.

A symbolic signing of the peace pact and pledging before the Holy Qur'an is done by the clan leaders of the warring parties to signal the end of the clan feud. The mediator states to both parties that they should respect the pledge they made and that a violation of the peace covenant will make them their enemy.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Need to examine propensity of conflict causes to produce violent strings

The examination of conflict strings has unveiled a distinct character of the violence landscape in the Bangsamoro. The evidence suggests that while political issues and shadow economies are the dominant sources of conflict in terms of frequency and magnitude, resource-based issues – particularly land and territorial boundary disputes; political issues, notably competition over political office; and identity issues such as clan feud or rido have exhibited the highest propensity for inducing conflict strings. This implies that incidents of resource-based conflicts, rido, and political violence have to be addressed at the onset before they result in a series of conflict incidents and morphs into various forms.

The propensity of specific conflict causes to spread and morph into more conflict episodes reveals that new priorities and approaches should be explored by the security sector, national agencies, local governments, and the peacebuilding sector, one that matches specific conflict prevention mechanisms to the nature and character of the conflict. For example, land-related programmes such as titling or redistribution projects have to consider the informal land market in place. The clash between formal and the informal rules can contribute to the further spread of clan feuding. Similarly, a stronger programme that targets the resolution of minor altercations from personal grudge or heated arguments is key in disrupting potential escalation of violence. At the policy level, curbing the proliferation of illicit weapons, strengthening the justice system down to the village level such as the peace and order councils lodged in local government units, and effective law enforcement should be advocated, as these lack or weaknesses enable clan feuds/war to recur and continue.

### Hybrid arrangements combining formal and informal institutions can disrupt conflict strings

The phenomenon of conflict strings and the morphing of violence should pave the way for developing and supporting existing effective measures that can disrupt these strings. Hybrid arrangements such as anti-clan feuding coalitions or the use of traditional institutions of justice should be explored to prevent the spread and escalation of conflict, which result to higher human costs. With identity issues, e.g., clan feuds, continuing as a major source of violence, an exploration of aspects of clan rules that govern behaviour and retribution can be incorporated into development and peacebuilding practice alongside notions of impunity, fairness, equality before the law and human rights.

The notion of tri-partite mechanisms involving local government units, NGOs, and community leaders has to be nuanced. Composition needs to be hand-picked based on the member's strategic utility to the process.

The individual or entity who leads the mechanism has to have the material basis, the legitimacy, credibility and the authority recognised by the warring parties. This calculation is subjective, based on how the warring parties define these elements. The hybrid mechanism has to be perceived as having the ability to trump the economic, political, and firepower of the warring parties.

The lesson remains simple – a multi-stakeholder approach in conflict resolution improves chances of having better outcomes. However, while hybrid arrangements and mechanisms is promoted or showcased for replication, its design must be informed by the scale of violence and the actors involved in violence. Hybrid processes are medium-term solutions that have to eventually graduate into the formal structures of the state. The state cannot have rival institutions that provide governance and social control over the population.

#### Need to recognize the multiplicity of actor identities

The BCMS data reveals the importance of examining the multiplicity of actor identities engaged in conflict. Family, kinship, and organizational affiliation of actors may help explain why conflict endures or escalates. Likewise, it can serve as an indicator for the potential of one single incident to result into strings of violence. For example, actors in land disputes start as two individuals in conflict but if one or both individuals are members of a major clan or an insurgent group, there is high probability that these individuals will harness the material (e.g., guns, ammunitions, combatants) and non-material (e.g., collective responsibility and shared commitments) resources of its group to fight the other. Data on conflict strings support this contention, with rebel groups as the major actor involved in recurring

violence followed by government security forces. This illustrates that rebellion-related violence – clash between rebel groups with government security forces draws and feeds on inter and intra-clan violence. Horizontal-level (community-level) conflict can result to vertical level (rebellion-related) conflict and the latter can intensify the former. Understanding this dynamics makes visible the key issues that feed on these conflicts such property rights framework that governs access to land, electoral competition, the expansion of an underground economy, and the relationships between this economy and local clan politics (Lara and Champain, 2009).

#### Conflict resolution is not a zero-sum game

Peace negotiations are not zero-sum games where one party wins and another one loses. The description of a conflict resolution process presented here showed elements of both competition and cooperation. While parties compete to ensure optimum gains, cooperation and engagement through a proxy (mediator) allows for a ‘win-win’ resolution through a bargaining process. Identifying what the strategic interests of the parties are clarifies at the onset for the mediator the strategies and means to pressure each party into a political settlement.

Successful negotiations among peace building groups engaged in settling cases of clan feuding demonstrate that the process of bargaining needs to be packaged as win-win solutions. There is no room for winner-take-all strategies. This may also resonate among information specialists engaged in designing a communication strategy to gain wide political support for the outcomes of peace processes such as the current peace agreement in the Philippines between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

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