

Briefing Summary

Zamboanga Amores Interfaith and World Vision: A case study of cross-faith collaboration in humanitarian response and social cohesion

In 2000, World Vision in the Philippines started its Mindanao Peacebuilding programme, which in turn led to the creation of Mindanao interfaith dialogue. As part of this 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. 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, crisis broke out in Zamboanga, resulting in the occupation and subsequent evacuation of several of the city's neighbourhoods, with limited movement in and out of those neighbourhoods. The three weeks of violence that followed became known as the Zamboanga Siege.

World Vision mobilised to send 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 and coordination of 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 encouraged dialogue throughout 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.

Key findings

Since World Vision closed its development programmes in Zamboanga, Amores has grown more reliant on its members' personal and religious networks, and more proactive in seeking ways to work with local government. On one hand this independence from World Vision's institutional support has limited

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, Catholics were doing this. It was more about proving why. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores

Amores' ability to do all the activities they want to do. On the other hand, this

has ensured that Amores functions as a grassroots organisation. Amores members are proud of their grassroots focus.

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; by offering psycho-social support through spiritual care in a culturally and contextually appropriate way; and helping humanitarian actors to access those most in need of aid.

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, wondering 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 they were un-Islamic, so we declared them halal. – Imam, Muslim 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, thus ensuring they would be able to access humanitarian assistance.

World Vision's response included distribution of hygiene kits and establishment of Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), and 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 and after, Amores' members promoted messages of love, forgiveness and acceptance.

Doubts were rising at the time, and people couldn't see eye to eye. Religious Leaders could stand up and say that Interfaith is 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 could throw an issue out then it will spread overnight. So spread religious leaders. - Peace Education Coordinator at partner NGO

As a network, Amores works to counter discrimination in a number of ways, including peace education, sharing their experiences and example of cross-faith collaboration, and illustrating that they dialogue to learn from one another rather than persuade one another to change beliefs.

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

An area in which Amores has worked and in which they want to expand, is youth engagement. 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 the total of 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 they now work with a variety of civil society, Faith-Based Organisations, and government partners. As a group they were able to contribute significantly to the humanitarian response, and in offering spiritual nurture based on their own faith during the 2013 crisis. They have also been able to speak into wider interfaith dialogue and coexistence issues through their participation in the Mindanao Interfaith Forum and other networking spaces facilitated by World Vision.

World Vision has played an important role in creating and developing Amores, but the partnership has been one of mutual benefit from the beginning. World Vision launched an important space for interfaith dialogue through Amores, but has been able to expand the reach and quality of its own programmes as a result. For example:

- World Vision contributed to the establishment of Zamboanga Amores Interfaith through vision-casting and messaging to members of Amores, and challenging them to recruit other faith leaders to engage with them in interfaith dialogue. Then it trained Amores members as trainers for peace and parenting workshops. The result was that Amores was able to develop as an entity which had 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, and also from Amores' members leading devotions for their staff.
- 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. Amores, as an interfaith network, supported World Vision in developing a process for birth registration in collaboration with local government which helped World Vision register more children for sponsorship, but took the idea and expanded upon it, creating a new charity that is still registering children today.

- World Vision engaged Amores in its humanitarian response, which expanded the reach of Amores members, allowing them to support more people and a greater diversity of affected families than they would have done on their own. This also gave World Vision access and legitimacy, by working through Amores' legal registration status and also by having respected faith leaders present at its activities.
- 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, and is empowering as they can 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, and so Amores is able to strengthen World Vision's achievement of its interfaith objectives region-wide.

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 2 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 myself and my reaction. – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores