



## **Amores Interfaith Forum: Supporting humanitarian aid and a return to peace in Zamboanga City**

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# **Amores Interfaith Forum: Supporting humanitarian aid and a return to peace in Zamboanga City**

## **Background: What is Amores Interfaith Forum?**

World Vision first began working in the Philippines in 1957. It started with child sponsorship in an orphanage in Visayas region and expanded its development work, mostly in partnership with evangelical churches. In 1977, World Vision began working in Zamboanga City on Mindanao Island in the south of the country.

In 2000, World Vision launched the Mindanao Peacebuilding programme. The programme led to the creation of Mindanao Interfaith Dialogue. As part of this programme, a forum of faith leaders in Zamboanga City was established. Initially called the Amores Ministerial Fellowship, the forum was intended to be a space for interfaith dialogue and collaboration. In recognition of this focus, the forum soon changed its name to Zamboanga Amores Interfaith (Amores), and was legally registered as a non-profit entity in 2011.

World Vision closed its development programmes in Zamboanga in 2012. Even after the closure World Vision maintained communication with Amores, and continued to encourage Christian-Muslim dialogue in the city. Amores has engaged in peacebuilding and reconciliation work, peace education, and spiritual nurture for children and families.

On 9 September 2013, crisis broke out in Zamboanga, with rebel group Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) advancing on the city. The ensuing fighting between the MNLF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, resulted 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.

World Vision Development Foundation (WVDF), formerly known as World Vision Philippines, sees its pre-existing relationship with Amores as a key to its success responding to the urgent humanitarian needs of civilians affected by the siege, and promoting social cohesion and a return to stability in the

months following the crisis. This paper seeks to analyse the role of Amores and World Vision in the 2013 response and in subsequent social cohesion work.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on primary narrative research conducted in Zamboanga City in August 2017. Over the course of four days, World Vision International's Senior Research Advisor for Faith and Development, along with the Emergency Communications Specialist and the Multimedia Specialist at World Vision Development Foundation in the Philippines, met with members of Amores Interfaith Forum, families affected by the Zamboanga siege, World Vision staff, and a variety of other stakeholders (see Annex for list of interviews). They also visited affected areas and activities hosted by Amores. The interviews were narrative in nature, lasting between one and two hours with general prompts designed to encourage interviewees to share their stories. Interviews were in English, Tagalog or Chavacano depending on the preference of the interviewee. When in Chavacano, a local Zamboanga language, a World Vision staff member from Zamboanga was present to translate.

Earlier in 2017, a humanitarian crisis broke out in the nearby city of Marawi, which some members of the affected population are also calling a siege. World Vision responded to the needs created by that crisis, and through the Mindanao Interfaith Forum, World Vision and Amores have ties to religious leaders in Marawi. Therefore, all interviews ended with a discussion of possible lessons learned from Zamboanga's experience that could be applied to Marawi or other conflicts in the Philippines or beyond.

Data was analysed thematically, from a lens of understanding the development and role of Amores, World Vision's engagement with Amores before and during the crisis, and ongoing social cohesion efforts in Zamboanga. To preserve the anonymity of participants, no interviewees are named in this paper.

## **Section I: Origins of Zamboanga Amores Interfaith and World Vision's role**

### **World Vision's Evangelical heritage**

World Vision's roots in the Philippines are not only Christian, but predominantly Protestant and Evangelical. In fact, a woman who worked for World Vision in Zamboanga in the 1980s said that during those years, World Vision collaborated with churches spreading the gospel and opening new churches. This is no longer the practice of World Vision in the Philippines, though. The move into interfaith dialogue in 2000, therefore, was a paradigm shift for many of its employees and partners.

At that time, World Vision had many Evangelical Christian partners, but limited relationships with Muslims or even Catholics in Zamboanga. When Amores was first established as a forum of religious leaders for interfaith dialogue, it was given the name of 'ministerial fellowship'. This name, however, was considered by many potential partners to be too Evangelical; as a Muslim imam explained, it sounded like 'missionary'.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that, initially, Amores was comprised almost entirely of Evangelical pastors, with one Muslim representative only.

*World Vision had the intention of bringing together all groups, because of the Mindanao context, with many tribes. We wanted to engage them in spiritual nurture for children, but we realised we were becoming so Christian. Even the Catholics were hesitant to engage. – World Vision Staff member*

*We would try to bring in new people, but they would say that the name was too Christian... We invited a local group. At first they didn't like the registration document, they said that it was too Christian. We went to every mosque in the area, with the pastors, and invited them and discussed their concerns with them. They were resistant to the Amores because they saw it as Christian. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

Gradually, World Vision staff began to adapt their focus. They asked the existing members of Amores to invite their contacts to join the forum. They also conducted extensive training and sensitisation for the existing Amores members about the importance of respecting other religions, and how religious leaders of different traditions could work together on values formation. This also gave Amores a focus, as World Vision mobilised Amores members to conduct spiritual nurture activities for children and their families.

Gradually, key World Vision staff and active Amores members came to understand and promote a vision of an interfaith forum that could come together out of a shared desire to instill strong values in children rather than to promote any religion. As Amores grew in number and diversity, it became a space for challenging stereotypes and promoting dialogue. The name 'Amores' comes from the word for 'love' in Zamboanga's local language Chavacano. This message of love became the unifying theme of Amores Interfaith Forum.

*When joining the Interfaith, it helped with my understanding of God. In Islam, we submit to the will of God. The AIF showed me, helped me to know what God wants me to be: to love one another, to accept anybody. We have a lot to learn about Mindanao tribes and the reasons. The Qur'an and the Bible: I studied what God wants and that is to love. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

## **Amores' identity solidified through legal registration**

After nearly a decade existing informally, under the umbrella of World Vision, Amores members decided to register as an independent legal entity. They did so in 2011, just one year before World Vision ended its development programming in Zamboanga. Several members insisted that their decision to register was not related to World Vision's impending departure, rather it was a function of their evolution as a group and an indicator that they had developed a shared vision and identity. They were also encouraged to do this by various other people, including World Vision staff and a visiting religious leader from abroad who helped foot some of the registration fees.

Registration gave Amores members a strong sense of identity. It marked a season in which Amores began to organise themselves and felt less dependent on World Vision for guidance and structure. It also

formalised their existence and led to a greater degree of visibility to other development organisations and government officials, as well as in Zamboanga's religious communities. They began to link with other organisations and build new partnerships.

*Registration was important to us because without it we have no identity as an organisation; we are powerless not being registered. The power we get from registration is to facilitate children, conduct trainings, go to the community without being doubted as a faith group. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

The registration process also clarified what Amores is and intends to be. It is a network of religious leaders, people whose role is to provide spiritual guidance and education to their congregations. They are not political, though their position as religious leaders enables them to collaborate with and even advise government officials. Their purpose is to emulate interfaith collaboration, and to extend contextually-relevant spiritual nurture and peace education to Zamboanga City and beyond.

## **Birth registration**

Over time, Amores has become well-known for its sister arm, Jabu Jabu, which is an NGO established specifically to register births. When World Vision was expanding its programming to a Muslim-majority neighbourhood of Zamboanga in 2000, they had trouble registering children for sponsorship because many did not have birth certificates. According to a World Vision staff member, many Muslim families did not think registering their children's birth was important and so did not bother. Not only did this mean their children could not be sponsored by World Vision, but legal identity is one of the child's fundamental rights, and lack of registration would later exclude them from education and employment opportunities.

World Vision approached Amores members to ask their assistance. They found that if an imam spoke to the community members about the importance of registering their children, more families would listen than if it were the employee of a Christian NGO speaking. The voice of Amores imams was helpful, but a system needed to be developed for legal birth registration, and Amores pastors and imams worked with World Vision to develop the system and get the support of the civil registry.

What began as a programme to register children for World Vision sponsorship grew beyond World Vision and became its own legal entity which continues to register children in Zamboanga and beyond, having recently expanded to work in Manila. Though Jabu Jabu is legally independent from Amores, the two organisations share leadership and work together closely. The Christian members of Amores share the vision of ensuring children have a legal identity in addition to receiving spiritual nurture from their leaders.

*Birth registration is a part of the spiritual nurture of children because children will have an identity, names, a legal identification. Spirituality is a holistic thing, so this is a part of it. – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores*

## **Amores' post-World Vision development**

When World Vision closed its office in Zamboanga, they pledged to continue to support Amores in an advisory role for at least two years, with the possibility of financial support. Over time, World Vision

has continued to support Amores with networking opportunities and limited training, though not with financial resources. World Vision staff have offered to help Amores write proposals and approach donors, but this has not yet happened, at least in part because Amores are not organised enough to know what assistance to request.

Furthermore, the forum has not had a change in, or even reassessment of, leadership in several years, and one stakeholder suggested that not enough effort is being made to include all voices in decision-making, or to proactively invite new religious leaders to preserve Amores' interfaith composition (which is now somewhat skewed to a predominance of Muslim faith leaders). Amores has grown more reliant on its members' personal and religious networks and more proactive in seeking ways to work with local government.

*It is nice to gather people of different sectors and faiths... it's a good initiative. I am happy but when World Vision financially — emm — divorced us it was hard. We would have parties, bring and share things to show and tell. We can still do that, but there is not much money. We have to pass the hat, share, share, share. – Chair of partner NGO and Catholic member of Amores*

Most of Amores' current activities are contracted training. Amores members offer training in a programme called Culture of Peace, to which World Vision first introduced them. They do this training for youth throughout Zamboanga in collaboration with local government and other NGOs.

On one hand, this independence from World Vision's institutional support has limited 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, by which they mean their visible presence within communities and their demonstrated understanding of the reality lived by Zamboanga's residents, with whom they have shared stories and experience. They are distinguished as an example of interfaith coexistence and peace messaging.

*Zamboanga Amores Interfaith is unique in Zamboanga because we are at the grassroots level. We are an example, a living testimony to our city, that Christians and Muslims can live together. – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores*

However, Amores members expressed a great deal of frustration at the limitations created by their lack of financial resources. They feel like they are often begging local government administrators to pay for their travel expenses and some food so that they can offer a message they believe in to the residents of Zamboanga's neighbourhoods. They would like to work in more schools, but most schools are also extremely resource limited. However, these restraints have led them to be targeted in identifying what to do and where and has also promoted creativity. Some Amores members are developing income-generation and livelihoods ideas that would help their financial situation and also be a visible form of interfaith collaboration. They are proactive in engaging local government and have built a wide network of partnerships with other development organisations in Zamboanga.

*But also, we have persevered more to conduct activities like the Culture of Peace [training] because our movement has decreased since it is only us financing it. So you could say we now have quality over quantity,*

*which is good. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

## **Section 2: Zamboanga siege and humanitarian response**

### **A shocking turn of events**

On 9 September 2013, the Muslim Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), in seeking recognition by the government, attacked Zamboanga City, Philippines. A three-week battle ensued, during which 183 rebels were killed, 292 others were detained, 23 soldiers and police were killed, and 12 civilians lost their lives. During those weeks, 10,000 homes were destroyed in battles or fires and more than 100,000 residents were displaced from their homes, creating a sudden onset major humanitarian crisis. More than 14,000 fled to evacuation sites, and more than one-third of those were still living in transitory shelters four years later.

This was the first time in the memory of Zamboanga's citizens that such a conflict happened, and it took people by surprise. Separatist movements have long been active on Mindanao, and clashes were not uncommon. Many initially assumed this was another minor clash. Residents, local government and community organisations were not prepared for the humanitarian crisis that ensued.

*We were caught barefoot, not ready. We didn't know what to do. This was the first armed conflict in Zamboanga. At first we thought it was a military exercise that would just last for a few hours. But to our dismay it lasted almost 24 days. From our office, it was the first time that we experienced a siege or such an incident. There were a lot of victims and families; we only knew how to handle hundreds, but there were thousands and we didn't know what to do. We were scrambling and confused. – Representative of City Social Welfare and Development (CSWD)*

*We expected it to be for one week, not for one month. I was really worried for my family. We were very close to the fighting, could hear gunshots clearly from our house. We were close enough that we were scared of stray bullets. But we stayed at home - there was not anywhere else to go. I played a lot of video games. – Evangelical Amores Youth member*

Many of the families fled the siege area with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the expectation that they would return home within days, if not hours. As the days extended to weeks, and more and more homes were destroyed, the level of fear increased, as did the scale of the humanitarian response. From the beginning of the crisis, local organisations, including churches and mosques, and individuals with medical or otherwise relevant expertise, worked with the government to provide aid as best they could. After one week, the Zamboanga siege was declared a national crisis and UN-OCHA, IFRC and other humanitarian actors added their resources and expertise. Though they often felt unqualified or out of their depth, there was a strong sense that Zamboanga's citizens stood in solidarity during those weeks.

*We held a prayer meeting, and collected 25 kg of rice, which I took to Grandstand. But I didn't know about*

*these kinds of crises, no one told me that people would come rushing trying to get some. I managed to escape, then I called the church members to come meet me and get their rice. – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores*

The shock affected members of Amores as well. Most Amores members were affected by the crisis. The chairman was isolated in his house in a siege area, unable to leave, without communications, and hosting dozens of displaced neighbours; he fled to safety after more than a week. The vice-chairman's church was razed to the ground on a street that saw some of the heaviest fighting. Other Amores members were either personally affected, or else had congregants or close family members who were affected.

The siege itself lasted for nearly three weeks, but the crisis has continued for more than four years. Many families lived in evacuation sites for two full years before being relocated to transitory shelters, where they have lived while waiting for permanent houses to be built. Many people in Zamboanga are still suffering from trauma, and learning to accept that such a short event could alter their lives so completely.

*During the time they lived in Grandstand, a 17-year-old child of one of my sisters died because it was too crowded. I don't know exactly what was the cause of death, maybe the pollution. I asked them to come live with me, but they didn't want to leave because their livelihoods are in the city, working in the market, and they aren't used to the journey. We are a poor family, but I never felt so poor. Even so, I would rather my relatives be safe even if they have less food. Especially when the 17-year-old child died, it was even more frustrating. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

*During the siege, there were lots of beggars... Mortality and crimes were rising. [Displaced families] were in one central location... Every day, there was death, harassment, rape. There were stories of selling bodies for 20 pesos... People don't talk about this or acknowledge it because they are in denial. - Peace Education Coordinator at partner NGO*

Because of the shock and life-altering nature of the crisis, when asked what the lessons learned from Zamboanga might be for the crisis in Marawi, or elsewhere, the most common response was a call to be vigilant. They never thought this could happen in Zamboanga, and so people in other places should learn from their experience: be vigilant because we never know what will happen. Furthermore, since the Marawi crisis began, there is heightened vigilance in Zamboanga, as people are concerned conflict could return to Zamboanga.

## **Religious leaders' role in the crisis**

In the humanitarian response, religious leaders were active and played an important role. However, they were not as visible as large, secular aid providers including United Nations agencies and the International Federation of the Red Cross. When asked about the role of faith-based organisations, faith communities or religious leaders in the response, beneficiaries who had resided in evacuation sites did not know of many religious aid providers. They were aware of the presence of some Islamic organisations providing aid, though they were not sure what they were doing. One person knew of a church who had provided a limited amount of aid.

Religious leaders had a strong presence, though, even if more as individuals than as part of a humanitarian infrastructure or of charities. A local government official said that the most important contribution of religious leaders in Zamboanga was spiritual nurture and the related psycho-social support: helping people process and find meaning in what they were experiencing. In a time when trust was fragile and fear was pervasive, a comforting voice from a faith leader helped bring a message of hope and assurance and a sense of some stability.

*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*

*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*

Religious leaders were also able to recruit volunteers and mobilise donations from their congregations or from sister religious communities elsewhere in the Philippines. One member of Amores, for example, received a donation from a church in Manila which he passed on to other Amores members to distribute. Many churches and mosques held collections of food and clothing in areas not under siege to take to displaced families. However, as a few Amores members noted, their first obligation was to their own congregations and their second obligation was to their families. As soon as they were confident their own were cared for, though, they found ways to bring help to others. Many volunteers working with NGOs were recruited by their religious leaders as well.

*I felt bad that I couldn't go to the city because my family and relatives were there. Even when the Interfaith [Amores] was helping to distribute goods, I couldn't join them... Everyday our congregation would go to the mosque to pray for Zamboanga, and for our loved ones. I also felt responsible for my jama'a [congregation]. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

Another important contribution of religious leaders was in messaging. During, and in the months following the siege, religious leaders were actively sharing a message of peace and acceptance. At the peak of the humanitarian response, many Muslim leaders, for example, spoke out on behalf of Christian and secular NGOs, assuring displaced families that they could and should accept assistance offered. Then, following the siege, many religious leaders conducted sensitisation sessions about accepting the other and learning to live together.

*When we were in the Grandstand [evacuation centre], there were symposiums for the young people with imams talking about what's going on, explaining to the young people that yes we should learn to forgive. This influenced me. – Displaced Muslim boy living in transitory shelter*

*In 2013, texts were sent all around the city with messages of hatred. In 2013, that was our focus. We wanted to*

*go to schools to do Culture of Peace, address issues of culture of violence. There was a gap. And now there is the same issue in Marawi. We want to share about what we did and how our relationship is still strong. – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores*

Finally, religious leaders served as advisors and connectors for aid providers. They linked the aid providers to local government and to people in need. Many examples were given, for example, of instances in which the mere presence of a religious leader allowed for greater peace and calm at distributions or other activities in the evacuation sites. When invited, they also prayed at the beginning of events, giving them an added formality and legitimacy.

## **Humanitarian partnership between Amores and World Vision**

As was true for other religious leaders, Amores was not particularly visible in the response. However, they were present and very active. 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.

*People were already in evacuation centres... but a problem was the identity of people. Some had documents but most didn't. So Jabu Jabu came in to register them. Imams were going in to the evacuation centres with the forms because they are the ones who have to sign them. We worked with the camp managers to do this - they also had to sign as witnesses along with another community leader. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

World Vision was only able to come to Zamboanga in the second week of the siege. There were challenges finding transportation in and they had limited finances. Furthermore, because they had closed their office in Zamboanga the year before, they now had no legal means of operating and needed to work with a partner. They considered a different partner, but that organisation was not prepared to engage in a humanitarian response. The World Vision response team decided that Amores, on the other hand, was the ideal partner. However, because the chairman was under siege himself he could not be contacted. World Vision eventually was able to contact other Amores members. By the time World Vision staff arrived in Zamboanga, the chairman was able to join them.

*When the siege happened, Amores was just one call away. They were still around... When the siege started, we sat immediately and planned. – World Vision staff member*

World Vision's response included distribution of hygiene kits and the establishment of Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) and Women and Young Children Spaces (WaYCS) and was a collaborative effort that built upon its extensive network of pre-existing relationships in Zamboanga. With Amores taking the lead, World Vision also recruited teachers to work in the CFS's and former sponsored children to volunteer at events alongside Amores members' congregants.

Religious leaders who were a part of Amores played a key role in facilitating, introducing and offering a legal legitimacy to World Vision's response. Though a late arrival, World Vision was able to begin programming immediately in locations that were in urgent need of assistance.

*We met with World Vision staff at an airport hotel to plan the distribution. Then we went directly to the office of the Mayor to request clearance to give aid to the evacuees, to go to the evacuation sites. There were checkpoints everywhere so we could only go with that clearance... Then, straight from there we were invited to join a coordination meeting with national officials. Many INGOs were also there. It was a meeting about how to respond. – Pastor, Evangelical member of Amores*

Once activities began, Amores members were present at all World Vision-organised events, which included distributions and CFS activities. At least one religious leader from Amores spoke and prayed at the beginning of each event, and usually two leaders were present, one Muslim and one Christian. Though most Amores' members were extremely busy with their own obligations, and were limited in what they could do, they ensured that someone was there for the opening and closing of each event. Volunteers from Amores' members' congregations also helped with activities including beneficiary registration and distributions.

Throughout and after, Amores' members promoted a message of love, forgiveness, and acceptance. They were grateful to World Vision for giving them the opportunity to contribute to the humanitarian effort in a formal way, reaching more people than they could have reached on their own. But they also took what they had learned from World Vision and applied it to the new reality during and after the siege, using their own stories and experiences to further promote a message of peace and interfaith cohesion.

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

## **Section 3: Zamboanga Amores Interfaith and social cohesion today**

### **Social relations since the siege**

Since the siege, a degree of stability has returned to Zamboanga. For some, there is improved cohesion across different segments of society, while for others social relations remain strained. As one woman living in a transitory shelter observed, when she and her family were displaced they lost their ties to many neighbours and they lost some friends, but they made new friends in the evacuation and transitory centres. For her, these new friends included people of different religions and tribes with whom she would not otherwise have contact. Similarly, a teenage boy said that when he was displaced, he had an opportunity to mingle with other young people. In fact, most of the displaced people who participated in this research emphasised that they do not feel discrimination and that they have good friends of different religious and tribal backgrounds. They clearly stated that they were all, regardless of

background, equally victims of a political battle.

Nonetheless, stigma and discrimination still exist in Zamboanga, and by some accounts has worsened for many of the city's residents. In particular, members of the Muslim minority often feel they are wrongly associated with the militant separatist groups which are predominantly Muslim. A Muslim member of Amores explained many Muslims who were not involved in rebel groups were associated with them at the time of the siege. In fact, MNLF used them, recruiting them in an underhanded way and manipulating them into demonstrating solidarity or even, in some cases, fighting with them. So it is not surprising that, as the Peace Education Coordinator at a partner NGO observed, the siege brought out people's prejudices, biases and stigmas.

*There is also discrimination against Muslims... If a Muslim applies for a role, it is hard to get in. Even in the mall it is hard for Muslims to get jobs until now. Also, equality in securing a job is needed, and businesses need to stop discriminating. We in Amores have the idea to open a water station and hire both Muslims and Christians, to demonstrate that it is possible to work together. – Imam, Muslim member of Amores*

*After the siege, there was more fear among Christians regarding Muslims. I'm not sure it has been dealt with. It should be, though. We should strengthen the bond between Muslims and Christians, work for lasting peace and to avoid terrorism. – Evangelical member of Amores Youth*

Within Amores, inequality is felt more acutely by its Muslim members, who are in the minority of Zamboanga City's population. They gave many examples of discrimination against and marginalization of Muslims in their local communities. This has likely motivated many Muslims to join an interfaith forum such as Amores, which may be one of the factors contributing to the fact that its active members currently comprise more Muslims than Evangelicals and Catholics together. It is worth noting that other reasons for this imbalance in the forum's membership were given, particularly explanations about how Catholic clergy follow strict schedules and Protestant clergy are busy. Nonetheless, several Muslim members of Amores referred to limits on their freedom of movement, which its Christian members did not express as a concern.

In Zamboanga, memories of the siege are still raw for many people, and forgiveness is difficult. The representative of a partner NGO, who also participates in Amores, said that her daughter told her that she feels angry at Muslims because they are the reason for the war. If even children had misconceptions and increased suspicion, she explained, then this illustrated how deep the wounds of the conflict were.

## **Amores' role in challenging stigma**

As a network, Amores works to counter discrimination in a number of ways, and its few Christian members play a crucial role in embodying and exemplifying acceptance, tolerance and friendship, rather than enjoying or flaunting any perceived privilege they may enjoy as members of the majority religion in the city.

*There was a new mosque inaugurated, and government officials were in attendance. We posted photos of the launch on Facebook, but people responded to these photos with false accusations, saying we were demonic. [The*

*[pastor] spoke out on their behalf and defended us. – Teacher, Muslim member of Amores*

Amores' challenges discrimination through training and testimonies like these, but also through activities such as the idea of starting a small business managed jointly by Muslims and Christians. They also promote the idea of acceptance by illustrating that they do not try to convert one other; that their purpose in interacting with one another is collaboration and dialogue rather than persuasion.

*I don't think that the way people viewed me changed. I do know Christians and they saw that the way I behaved was good. I have proved that not all Muslims are like the MNLF... My motivations as a Muslim shouldn't be explained. I don't need to explain myself. By my actions, my motivations are clear. – Muslim member of Amores Youth*

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. A pastor in Amores said that he has been texting pastors near Marawi encouraging them not to hate, reminding them of the forgiveness he learned to extend after the Zamboanga siege. Amores also held a meeting when the crisis in Marawi began, and together as an interfaith forum developed a shared statement of solidarity with the victims of the crisis.

However, Amores members do not feel confident that they are succeeding in spreading their example or their message. A World Vision staff member suggested that interfaith work is thriving more in Zamboanga than elsewhere because of the city's Christian majority, which makes it a minority city in a region that is mostly Muslim and tribal. She believes this creates a space for dialogue that does not exist elsewhere in Mindanao. Furthermore, a few members of Amores suggested that the depth of hatred and bitterness in Marawi is even greater than it has been in Zamboanga. According to some Amores members, this is unfortunate as they suggested that Marawi may be seen as a wealthier, more developed city than Zamboanga, so should be a more comfortable place to live, not less.

*Interfaith is to bring unity under the different religions. If you are Muslim, Christian, whatever... we are all brothers, all Filipino, whether we like it or not. Except for those people who are there to fight against us... We want resolution to Marawi, where it is not just Muslims suffering but also Christians. So it would be good to bring them back to the negotiating table, to try to solve the problems in a peaceful way. I cannot do this by myself alone... World Vision sent us to Davao to talk about this. We looked at the Bible, at what God wants us to be. – Lay leader, Catholic member of Amores*

Jabu Jabu also continues to promote the values of interfaith as it expands to register more children in more locations. For many residents of Zamboanga, Amores Interfaith is an unknown entity but Jabu Jabu is well known. However, the imams who are most active in Jabu Jabu continue to emphasise that it is an interfaith activity, and a pastor in Amores stated that he strongly supports its activities, though he believes similar activities are needed for Christians. While Amores' Muslim members and partner NGOs in Zamboanga may assume that Christians will go through the government system even though Muslims do not, he argued that it is difficult and many families would rather a church system for registering their children. For people of faith, regardless of their tradition, having a legal identity that has been verified by

their faith community is an important part of identity formation. This in turn empowers people to engage with others in society with greater confidence.

## **Amores' impact on its members**

Religious leaders in both Zamboanga and Marawi who engage in interfaith work are outliers, not representative of their community. One Muslim teacher said that when he joined a different interfaith forum a decade ago, he was criticised by members of his community to the point of stone throwing. As a result he stopped doing interfaith dialogue for a season, until he later joined Amores. Many members of Amores shared that, before joining, they had had no contact with people of a different faith. A few participants who were familiar with Amores but not members themselves, commented that it takes a certain type of personality to do interfaith work: outgoing, energetic and curious.

*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*

Participation in Amores has also taught its members to engage people different from them more confidently. In particular, some Muslim members of Amores commented that they previously did not know how to talk to Christians or to women who were not family members. Now they are able to do so because they have come into contact with different people due to Amores activities.

It is worth noting here that Amores has very few women members. The only female member we met was a co-opted member because of her leadership role in a partner NGO. The main reason given for this is that most faith leaders in Zamboanga are men. While Amores is deeply committed to interfaith engagement, its members did not express a similar level of interest in engaging women.

## **Amores' influence on youth**

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 the vision and the wisdom of experience. Amores' leaders agree with this, though they are not currently engaging in many initiatives to mobilise youth.

*There is an element penetrating youth: ISIS is teaching their way to our youth. We hear of youth from Zamboanga recruited to [armed groups] in Marawi... We [members of the church] are trying to come up with a programme... we want to work with Youth. To influence them to, instead of joining these elements, to go to school, get educated... That’s why we in Amores are trying to do this, but we don’t have the financial capability. – Lay leader, Catholic member of Amores*

One reason why some youth are being drawn to extremist groups is financial need due to un- or under-employment. Many of Zamboanga's young people are scrambling to create a livelihood for themselves, which leaves them alternately extremely busy trying to find work or idle when they fail. It is not only religious militants who fill the void created by this tension, but also drugs, gangs and other criminal

elements. Many participants observed that volunteering can help counter this trend by engaging youth in productive and educational activities.

Amores Youth, a network of young people founded by Zamboanga Amores Interfaith, is active in many communities. The examples of active Amores Youth groups given, however, were all of groups that were entirely or predominantly Muslim. These groups were likely Muslim-majority because they were based in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods and not because of any attempt by their members to seek out co-religionists. However, the value of interfaith dialogue, a fundamental part of the DNA of Zamboanga Amores Interfaith, seemed to be forgotten by Amores Youth. It is worth noting that this research only directly interviewed one active member of Amores Youth. Rather, he described Amores Youth as a youth group that promoted volunteerism. Indeed, many examples were given of a spirit of volunteerism among Zamboanga's youth, especially Muslim youth.

*Youth during the siege - they organised themselves and helped with WASH and distributions... Their religions were mixed, but more Muslim volunteers. Many of them, through this experience, turned out to be leaders. After their training they were empowered as partners and as advocates. – Representative of City Social Welfare and Development (CSWD)*

Christian members of Amores Youth were more aware of its interfaith origins, but they were less likely to be actively engaged in any activities. Rather, for them, Amores Youth was about attending interfaith activities when invited by their pastor or priest, which had only happened once in their experience, several years before the siege. One of these youth explained that he thought the event that he attended was important, but nothing had happened since then. He saw the value of interfaith work but it is not priority to him. He would go to things if invited but he is not taking any initiative. He has a few Muslim friends, defined as acquaintances with whom he is on good terms, and that feels like enough to him. Another explained that he may like to do more, but life is busy and he does not have time.

*After the camp, we made a Facebook group. I'm not sure if it's still active - other members have gotten busy with work. I'm pretty busy, too... At first we really liked to interact with each other. We need this again now because of today's issues. – Evangelical member of Amores Youth.*

Most participants agreed that religious leaders are influential in shaping youth and therefore bear some responsibility to train up youth to be tolerant and active in promoting social cohesion, as well as keeping youth out of illegal or extremist movements. One former staff, however, noted that the generation that is currently growing up is challenging to work with because technology plays such a strong role in their lives, whereas their religious leaders may feel irrelevant to them. However, the youth interviewed for this research all appreciated when religious leaders invested in them.

*Amores and [another interfaith forum] both struggle with the possibilities of who will carry this to the next generation. Everyone is ageing. Who will be the next generation to carry on the dialogue? We have a second line in place, but wisdom is needed and that comes with age. They are also restrained with resources to work with too many people or projects. – Peace Education Coordinator at partner NGO*

## Conclusion

Amores Interfaith Forum has come into its own as a grassroots organisation, its sum is greater than its parts. It is a network which 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 during the 2013 crisis. Amores has 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 they 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 its 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 which helped World Vision register more children for sponsorship. Amores 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 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 Council. This presents an ongoing capacity building and relationship building opportunity for Amores, and is also empowering as they can share their experiences and lessons learned with other faith leaders in Mindanao and elsewhere. World Vision 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.

## Recommendations for World Vision

- Continue to strategically engage faith leaders in humanitarian responses. Faith leaders can contribute by facilitating coordination with other stakeholders, especially local government and other members of civil society; by offering psycho-social support through spiritual care in a culturally and contextually appropriate way; and ensuring World Vision can access a greater diversity of communities with aid by introducing and vouching for World Vision in the community.
- Develop disaster preparedness training for faith leaders. This training should include instruction on how to mobilise one's congregation to provide aid, how to bring in assistance from other members of their religious network in non-affected areas, principles of offering spiritual care, and the importance of psycho-social support for coordination in times of crisis, and best practices in aid delivery.
- Work in equal partnership with faith leaders. World Vision has a great deal to offer in capacity-building and networking opportunities for faith leaders, as well as challenging their thinking on various issues. At the same time, World Vision can benefit and strengthen its own programming in the process. When faith leaders contribute to World Vision's programming they may be empowered to expand their influence as well.
- Continue to promote interfaith dialogue through establishment of interfaith fora and activities, messaging the value of interfaith engagement, and helping faith leaders understand the social benefits of interfaith dialogue in a way that does not challenge their fundamental beliefs.

## **Recommendations for interfaith fora**

- Invest in the next generation early. Mentor younger faith leaders or youth in faith communities to help them build a vision for social change and interfaith collaboration from a young age.
- Be proactive and selective in inviting members to ensure a balance in diversity that is representative of the religious composition of the wider community.
- Encourage all members to speak and participate equally. Give quieter members opportunities, and challenge them to share their opinions openly.
- Invest in grassroots and embrace local networks. Remember that one of the most important roles of a faith leader is working with members of one's congregation. At the same time, embrace opportunities to share experiences and to build relationships with high-level political or religious networks, whilst ensuring that grassroots engagement is maintained. This can be done in various ways, for example, by delegating some members to focus on grassroots work while delegating others to participate in wider networks.
- Register as a legal entity to ensure continuity and a shared sense of identity. This is valuable not just in establishing credibility, but also as a process of defining the group's priorities and central focus.

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