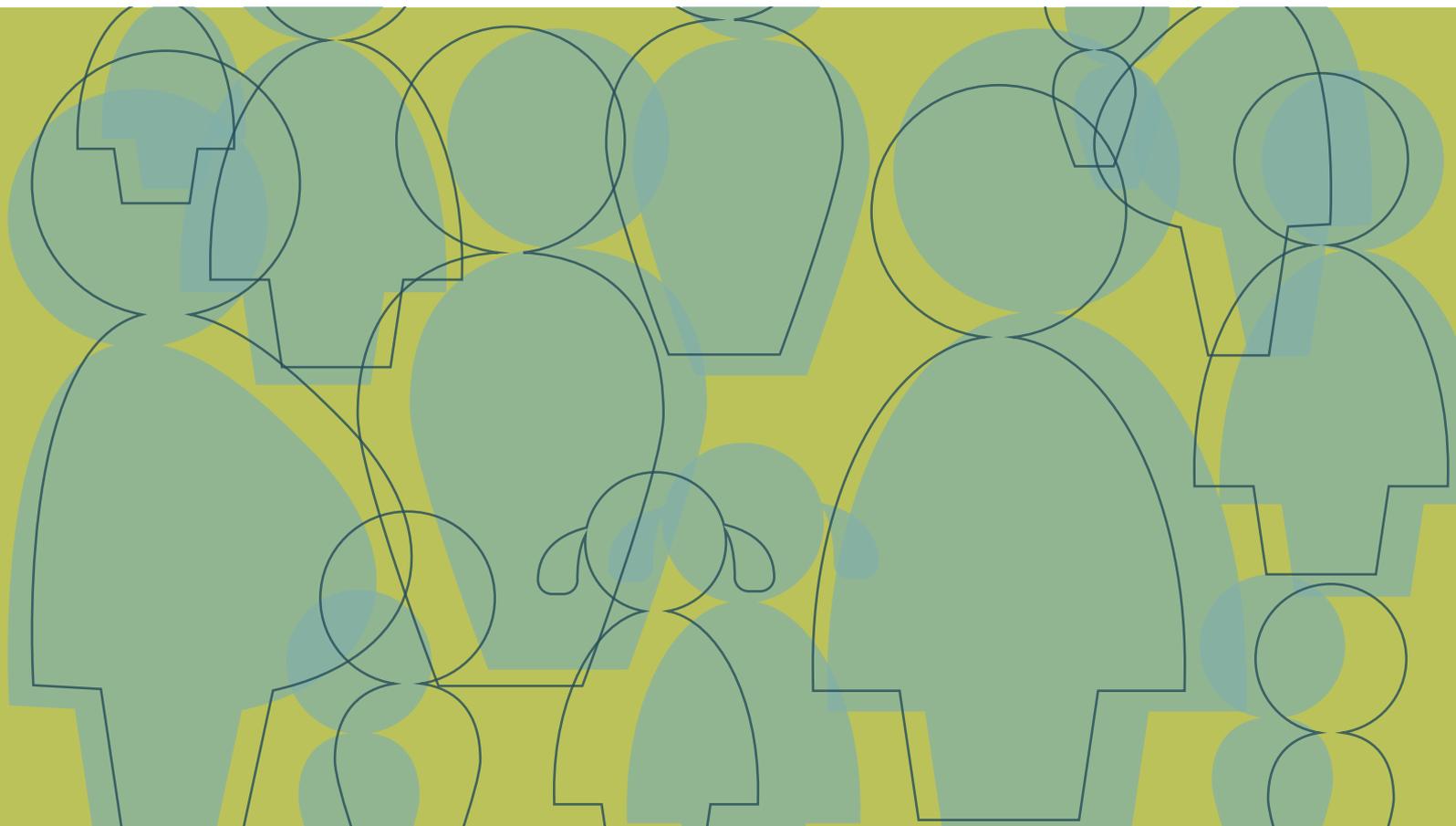


HPG working paper – Executive summary

Inclusion and exclusion in displacement and peacebuilding responses in Mindanao, Philippines: falling through the cracks

Maria Carmen Fernandez^{ID} and Bai Shaima Baraguir^{ID} with John Bryant^{ID}

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This report is one of multiple case studies that form part of the HPG Integrated Programme project ‘Falling through the cracks: inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action’.

About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author’s name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Maria Carmen (Ica) Fernandez^{ID} is an independent researcher and development practitioner (@icafernandez).

Bai Shaima (Bam) Baraguir^{ID} is an independent scholar and peace practitioner.

John Bryant^{ID} is a Senior Research Officer at HPG.

Executive summary

The Philippines is among the countries most heavily affected by internal displacement. Most of those forced from their homes live in the southern island of Mindanao, particularly in the area now known as the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the site of cyclical environmental disasters, intermittent high-intensity armed conflict and various waves of humanitarian response efforts over the past 50 years. While a peace agreement signed in 2012 between the national government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has led to a general reduction of violence and a new regional political autonomy, threats from various Islamic State-inspired extremist groups, flooding, landslides and earthquakes, and inter-communal conflicts and blood feuds (*rido* or *pagbanta*) continue to displace tens of thousands a year. As of the end of 2021, an estimated 65,918 families (approximately 267,278 individuals) are displaced in Mindanao, of which 37% are currently located in the BARMM (UNHCR, 2021).

This paper draws on interviews with aid practitioners, displaced persons and government officials to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion in the humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors. It uses the case of the BARMM, a region that has protracted forced displacement despite the implementation of peace agreements and post-crisis reconstruction processes. The agreements with the MILF reflect national inclusion policy, acknowledging historical injustices done by a majority-Christian nation-state against a minoritised Muslim and non-Muslim indigenous population. However, deep-seated horizontal, inter-communal fissures and inequalities remain. This raises fundamental questions: why is it that despite all the government and donor initiatives over the last decades, certain groups are still left behind during crises and recovery, and why do they fall through the cracks?

How are inclusion and exclusion understood and manifested?

This study explores several key questions. The first asks how inclusion and exclusion are understood, and how they manifest themselves. The paper finds that different actors have different concepts and frameworks in relation to inclusion and exclusion, at different levels, which has implications on targeting and delivery. This starts with fundamental language differences: with no direct translation for inclusion across the various Bangsamoro vernaculars, words such as *langkap* in the two mainland languages of Maguindanao and Mranaw, *lapay*, *saplag* and *sakup* in Sinug, and *merafeg* or *meamung* in Teduray are used to refer to inclusiveness. All of these terms roughly mean ‘all-encompassing’ – to include or cover everyone (*kasama ang lahat*, in Tagalog/Filipino) – and most have no direct antonyms. This frames a particular interpretation of inclusion: many aid users and practitioners interviewed saw universal coverage as necessary for an inclusive response. While most accepted the notion of prioritisation of those in particular need when resources were scarce, everyone must eventually get support, even those seen as ‘stronger’ or less vulnerable. Justified by concerns such as more targeted aid potentially dividing communities, infringing on the personal and communal dignity of groups such as the elderly,

or spreading ‘defeatist’ attitudes in a conflict-affected society, such a definition does share some commonalities with international humanitarian organisations that are increasingly shifting towards a more nuanced interpretation of inclusion.

There is a general consensus that the concept of inclusion itself is political, and power dynamics play a pivotal role in inclusion and exclusion in the BARMM. While aid is supposed to be objective and non-partisan, this becomes virtually impossible when the primary institutions responsible for aid delivery are products of negotiation, particularly in the midst of the implementation of a peace deal. The peace process shapes how inclusion is perceived and operationalised in humanitarian responses in the BARMM, since the institutions that arose from it are products of political negotiation. Although most humanitarian and development programme guidelines include provisions across gender and ethnolinguistic divides, remaining consistent with Philippine national legislation, political representation is led by the so-called ‘tri-people’ framework of Muslim, Christian ‘settler’ and non-Moro indigenous groups. Quotas and power-sharing are therefore shorthand for inclusion, although in such a system, the less-populated island provinces are neglected, receiving less and poorer quality international and local support.

Who is perceived to be excluded in humanitarian responses?

This representation-based model has impacts at a local level, leading to a prioritisation of managing tensions and maintaining social cohesion, with implications for exclusion. Its success in delivering inclusion is highly dependent on the role of ‘brokers’, including barangay (village) captains, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers and other intermediaries. Links to both affected communities and higher-level decision makers make such facilitators central in advocating for the needs of the ‘unaddressed populations’ that they represent and to which they often belong. However, the outsize focus on consensus and social equilibrium can lead to the stifling of dissent and further marginalisation of minorities. Although the Philippines scores relatively well on gender-related indicators, there is a pervasive belief that only men can visibly lead; LGBTQI+ people cannot be overtly visible in many places; and people with disabilities (PWDs) are faced with erasure from much of daily life. This system also makes broker roles over-powerful and susceptible to elite capture. The role of class and blood, with members of the *datu* class able to trace their lineages back through centuries, is not always well understood as far as it pertains to access to services and elite capture, but a senior official linked exclusion to a ‘sultanic syndrome’ where local power is used and abused. Overcoming such dynamics requires skilled facilitation by those with knowledge of the region and justifying, in the eyes of some, a role for more ‘objective’ outsiders in provision. Above all, the processes that determine inclusivity are governed by trust and are ‘80% relationships, 20% technical’.

Exclusion in humanitarian responses in the BARMM is also determined by the internationally led aid system and how it operates. Donors continue to favour large, familiar international partner agencies and often pre-select project types and targeted segments of the population, irrespective of need. The norm is for consultation processes to be performed simply for compliance purposes, with genuine accountability instead reserved for donors and contracting international NGOs (INGOs), rather

than affected populations – a relationship that persists despite the majority of funding now coming from central government. For many practitioners, the continued exclusion of internally displaced persons (IDPs) can be ascribed to coordination challenges among both international agencies and national authorities, as well as the reactionary nature of humanitarian initiatives that are blind to structural problems.

When does exclusion occur in a protracted crisis?

A further study question asks when exclusion happens, in a context of multiple crises over a long period of time. The protracted and cyclical nature of crisis events in the BARMM highlights the temporal dimension of inclusion and exclusion, with respondents noting that inclusion is highest during and immediately after crises but tapers quickly over time. One clear implication is that the traditional humanitarian focus on the immediate ‘surge’ phase enforces exclusion dynamics even while targeting the most vulnerable. Since many Bangsamoro IDPs remain transitory years after the event with compounding crises and no clear end to uncertainty, practice must shift to ensure that IDP needs are addressed even after the first six months with adjustments made to respond to increasing perceptions of exclusion over time. This is a particular challenge, owing to both an unreliable data ecosystem, and the label of *bakwit* (evacuee) that carries deep social stigma, leading many to obscure their displaced status. The lack of adequate social, physical and digital infrastructures to support long-term IDPs, let alone ensure accessibility for PWDs, is a major barrier to inclusive service delivery particularly with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Going beyond single event-based frameworks will also require better integration with the local government planning and delivery systems of affected communities. This must work to improve upon the many shortcomings and gaps in responses that were recalled by aid users and which were damaging to their longer-term prospects for inclusion. The application of stringent post-disaster guidelines and the liberal use of expropriation, for example, resulted in some IDPs being forbidden to rebuild their homes. A focus on camp-based support often excludes IDPs staying in house-based arrangements on the fringes of urban areas from services. Improving on such outcomes will mean overcoming limited mandates and donor fatigue, as well as increasing the flexibility to iterate. A major part of the work will involve better coordination and collaboration between the Mindanao Humanitarian Team (MHT) and the traditional development and peacebuilding actors.

Does greater localisation and autonomy help inclusion?

The final key question asks whether, given the BARMM’s relative political and fiscal autonomy, a humanitarian and post-conflict response with greater local involvement is a more inclusive one. Generally, respondents agreed that greater localisation and fiscal, legal and cultural autonomy can help increase inclusion by ensuring that aid activities align with what people need. Key examples of effective and inclusive humanitarian initiatives often combine both Western and customary concepts and delivery mechanisms (such as *sadaqah* or charity and various forms of mutual aid, often passed through traditional and kinship-based decision-making structures), two-way information flows, and consistent

community involvement and leadership not only in the design phase but also in ensuring follow-through and sustainability. However, process safeguards will need to be put in place to manage horizontal, inter-communal dynamics that normalise certain groups hoarding more resources and power while letting others fall through the cracks. To be truly inclusive, humanitarian actors together with state officials must be held accountable in closing the loop and ensuring that the commitment to support IDPs to return to their place of origin or dignified resettlement in a place of their choosing is met.

Recommendations

The following recommendations (Table 1) aim to inform future leadership and response to protracted and cyclical, complex crises such as that experienced in the Bangsamoro, and direct policy and practice towards more inclusive humanitarian and development action.

Table 1 Recommendations for the humanitarian response to cyclical, complex crises

General recommendation	Specific recommendations	
	To the Philippine government and donor organisations and INGOs	To the BARMM and local actors in the region
1. Design grounded inclusion policies based on the type of crisis, as well as existing needs and opportunities in specific geographic regions, including social and environmental safeguards for all project types.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shift towards a basic assumption of universal coverage beyond sector-based targeting. ● Interrogate existing norms and biases related to inclusion and exclusion, while addressing intersectionality of needs, considering age, gender, ethnicity, disability and other factors. ● Review national DRRM policies to differentiate guidelines and protocols for environmental disasters and armed conflict. ● Pass the national IDP law and other pending inclusion policies. ● Revise issuances and protocols creating post-crisis task forces operating in the BARMM and other areas, to ensure greater representation and control by local civilian actors as a default. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shift towards a basic assumption of universal coverage beyond sector-based targeting. ● Pass the regional IDP law and other pending BTA bills related to the inclusion of more diverse groups and their needs. ● Continue the work of the BTA in retrofitting national policy and mechanisms to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose to the BARMM context, including the legal acknowledgement of traditional and customary practice in accordance with the BOL. This includes empowering hybrid traditional and legal mechanisms such as tri-people councils of elders and bringing in the relevant <i>datu/sultan/bae-a-labi</i> and religious leaders for decision-making, information dissemination and service delivery during and after a crisis. ● Invest in baseline physical, social and digital infrastructure to ensure even service delivery across the region. This can harness resources earmarked for post-peace agreement rehabilitation and reconstruction. ● Initiate consultations to address deep-seated biases and norms that lock in social exclusion.

Table 1 Recommendations for the humanitarian response to cyclical, complex crises (cont.)

General recommendation	Specific recommendations	
	To the Philippine government and donor organisations and INGOs	To the BARMM and local actors in the region
<p>2. Complement events-based crisis assessments and programming with longer-term area-based analysis, including conflict analysis and stakeholder assessments.</p> <p>3. For ongoing displacement events, institute catch-up plans to conclude ‘durable solutions’-based return and resettlement of IDPs.</p> <p>4. Establish sustainable financing measures to support follow-through.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritise multi-year funding streams and ensure sustainability of exit strategies. ● Review inclusion safeguards in other workstreams including the GPH–MILF normalisation process. ● Activate coordination and convergence mechanisms – involving government, donors, civil society and private sector actors – not only for information sharing, reporting and monitoring, but for joined-up programming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Integrate post-disaster requirements and needs of IDPs in the Bangsamoro Development Plan, Provincial Development and Physical Framework Plans (PDPFPs), and the municipal Comprehensive Land Use Plans (CLUPs) of both affected and host communities, including adequate delivery of shelter, public utilities and social services. ● Activate the Mindanao Working Group and ensure functional integration with the MHT and existing programming of the BARMM under the Block Grant and other local funds. ● Support local governments in the accessing and efficient use of existing resources, particularly Internal Revenue Allotment and disaster financing for the dignified resettlement and return of IDPs.
<p>5. Develop packages for identified sectors, while ensuring balance and ‘dual targeting’.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review and reassess strategies for tracking and supporting identified groups: women and girls, young men, PWDs, orphans, widows, older people and non-Moro IPs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implement existing commitments in the CAB and BOL regarding inclusion and support for specific sectors.
<p>6. Partner and collaborate with local actors, while continuously assessing potential ‘blind spots’ that embed existing exclusion in communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure local representation and shared leadership in national decision-making bodies while ensuring diversity in partnerships. ● Bring in local organisations as collaborators and co-applicants in grant applications, not just as programme beneficiaries or subgrantees. ● Invest in capacity-building and organisational development for local grassroots networks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support locally led and implemented initiatives, with participatory and peer-led design as a given, while ensuring diversity in partnerships. This includes options to ‘rotate’ representation and implementation partnerships to try to manage elite capture and/or other forms of consolidation of power and influence. ● Ensure the localised selection and hiring of personnel, at all levels of response.

Table 1 Recommendations for the humanitarian response to cyclical, complex crises (cont.)

General recommendation	Specific recommendations	
	To the Philippine government and donor organisations and INGOs	To the BARMM and local actors in the region
<p>7. Ensure that extensive social preparation and consultation with local networks are built in across interventions at all stages of the project cycle.</p> <p>8. Invest in communications as a basic inclusion strategy, while ensuring that the core messages and methods being used are themselves inclusive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create safe spaces and platforms where the diversity of opinions is allowed and processed. ● Institute grievance redress mechanisms. ● Invest in accessibility support for people with hearing, visual or intellectual impairments and for those who are isolated in their homes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish two-way communication and coordination channels using languages and platforms accessible to residents – written in the vernacular, using online/offline platforms such as radio, town hall meetings and other regular gatherings (e.g. Friday <i>khutbah</i> or sermons, neighbourhood small-group check-ins). ● Invest in accessibility support for people with hearing, visual or intellectual impairments and for those who are isolated in their homes.
<p>9. Support decision-making with data. Establish monitoring and evaluation systems across longer timeframes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implement existing data-related legislation, including full implementation of the Community Based Monitoring System Law. ● Strengthen data practice for post-crisis response, including conducting household surveys and mapping processes while ensuring appropriate levels of disaggregation. ● Enforce interoperability between datasets held by international humanitarian actors, development organisations, local governments and communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enforce data reforms in the BARMM across all ministries; work with donors and national agencies to transfer access and data management capacities of key national surveys as well as crisis-specific datasets (Marawi’s Kathanor; various surveys run by the UN system) to the BARMM. ● Invest in training and capacity-building for the better use of data at the local level.
<p>10. Ensure transparency and accountability both for donors and implementers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implement donor transparency portals for all major humanitarian responses. ● Build in third-party monitoring and citizen accompaniment in all programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Effect continuous capacity-building and organisational development related to procurement and service delivery to avoid inefficiency and leakage.



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Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg
