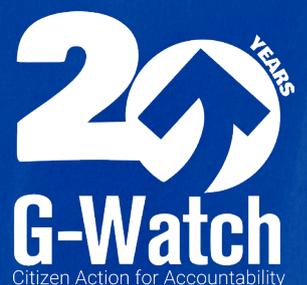


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*A Paper Series on
Transparency, Participation & Accountability*

**Building Transparency,
Participation, and
Accountability in BARMM
Amidst the COVID-19
Pandemic**

Yasmira Moner and Joy Acheron



About TPA Now! Paper Series

The challenge of transformative impact of transparency, participation and accountability (TPA) initiatives points to the need for a different way of doing accountability. To advance the discourse and practice of 'strategic TPA,' Government Watch (G-Watch), in partnership with Accountability Research Center (ARC), launches *TPA Now! A Paper Series on Transparency, Participation and Accountability* as a platform for practitioners, researchers and action strategists to present evidence and reflect on the practice and research on strategic TPA and to broaden awareness on the importance of accountability in governance.

G-Watch is an independent citizen action and research for accountability in the Philippines that aims to contribute in the deepening of democracy through political reform and citizen empowerment.

ARC is an action-research incubator based at American University in Washington, DC that seeks to strengthen and learn from the work of civil society organizations and policy reformers on the frontlines of accountability work and build knowledge for the field of transparency, participation and accountability.



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Building Transparency, Participation, and Accountability in BARMM Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Photo source: <https://bangsamoro.gov.ph/news/latest-news/bta-approves-proposed-transition-plan/>

The ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) marked the end of the decades-old armed struggle in Muslim Mindanao. Hereon, a new phase of peaceful struggle began through a new autonomous setup led by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that replaced the deemed ‘failed experiment’ that was the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The newly institutionalized Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has been granted greater fiscal autonomy and territorial expansion to achieve lasting peace and sustainable development.

From the onset, the implementation of the BOL is a game changer in the peace process between the Government of the Philippines

(GPH) and the MILF for two reasons: Firstly, it is considered as a gender-responsive autonomy law. And secondly, it has granted a ministerial form of government with a political formula allowing for the sharing of power between and among Muslims, *lumad*¹, and Christians in the multicultural region of the Bangsamoro. While the newly-created BARMM is touted as the product of a democratic, inclusive and gender-responsive political agreement, some studies have shown that structural challenges (Abinales 2000; Jubair 2007; Mastura 2012; Mercado 1984; Vitug and Gloria, 2000) remain as stumbling blocks, coupled with the continuing threats of terrorism with the post-Marawi siege, and feudalistic politics in the region. Yet, the politically-negotiated agreement between

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1 Lumad refers to the non-Muslim indigenous peoples of Mindanao.

the Philippine government and the MILF is undeniably a bright spot against the restive region of Southern Philippines.

Still in the process of transition, the BARMM victory is expected to be put to the test amidst the crisis that hit the country early this year. The lockdown that Malacañang² imposed only covered Metro Manila, which was later extended to the whole of Luzon. The lockdown measures that were imposed in Visayas and Mindanao were made by the respective LGUs.

To date, the country has recorded a total of 380,729 cases with 42, 462 active cases and 7, 221 deaths.³ It is worth noting that BARMM remains to have the lowest number of cases in the country with only 1,847: 447 active cases and 67 deaths. Resource allocation and service delivery to the communities are among the proactive actions being done at the regional level. Php13 billion has been allocated for the Bangsamoro Response and Recovery Action Plan for the pandemic, funded through the regional government's contingency plan.⁴

How BARMM responds to the COVID-19 crisis is a demonstration of its emerging

governance. What makes BARMM different from ARMM? How inclusive is the new autonomous region? How open and accountable is the process of its governance? What are the challenges and prospects of BARMM in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic?

Transparent, Accountable and Responsive Crisis Governance

Accountability is the process by which those in power are made (1) to answer for their decisions, actions and inaction; (2) to perform their obligations and mandates set in laws and norms; and (3) to respond to citizen demands and voice. Transparency and responsiveness are elements of accountability. They form part of the four key elements of accountability:

- **Information** – Making public information available/ accessible/ useful to citizens.
- **Mechanisms** – Enabling mechanisms of accountability, such as feedback, grievance redress and monitoring and evaluation systems.
- **Responsiveness** – Ensuring response and action from the government.
- **Participation** – Empowering citizens

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2 Malacañang is the official residence of the President of the Philippines.

3 Covid-19 Case Tracker, <https://www.doh.gov.ph/2019-nCoV>

4 www.bangsamoro.gov.ph

in holding their governments accountable and demanding responsive and effective delivery of public services and programs.

The four elements of accountability are premised on the idea that to enable and sustain accountability, there needs to be working policies, mechanisms, and initiatives in government, and there has to be capable citizens who will make use of government policies, mechanisms, and initiatives in order to generate response that will hold those responsible accountable and improve the system.

Article XII, Section 2 of the BOL on Fiscal Autonomy provides the general accountability framework that governs BARMM:

“Pursuant to the Constitution, the Commission on Audit shall be the exclusive auditor of the Bangsamoro Government and its constituent local government units. The Bangsamoro Government shall establish an auditing body which shall have internal auditing responsibility in accordance with Republic Act No. 3456, otherwise known as the “Internal Auditing Act of 1962,” as amended. The Bangsamoro Government shall implement transparency and accountability mechanisms consistent with open government practices and generally accepted financial management principles.”

Parallel to this constitutional provision, the 17-member Committee on Accounts and Audit was constituted by the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA)⁵ Parliament, “which shall have jurisdiction over all matters relating to income, revenues and internal auditing of the funds for all the expenditures and activities of the BTA, other ministries, agencies and offices of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).”⁶



The 17-member Committee on Accounts and Audit of the BTA parliament with Members of the Parliament (MPs) Anna Tarhata Basman as Chairperson and Amilbahar Mawallil as Vice-Chairperson. (Photo source: <https://parliament.bangsamoro.gov.ph/>)

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5 The Bangsamoro Transition Authority is the interim regional government of BARMM.

6 Retrieved from: <https://parliament.bangsamoro.gov.ph/2020/07/24/bta-parliament-constitutes-committee-on-accounts-and-audit/>.

BTA Interim Chief Minister and MILF Chair Al Haj Murad Ebrahim had also earlier vowed to work for a government that will be “free of all ills of governance.” This clearly shows the intent of the BTA to prioritize accountability in governance and to ensure that the newly won Bangsamoro peace will work for the benefit of the Moro people and all Filipinos.

Crisis Governance and the Bangsamoro

A crisis creates opportunities. In the case of Muslim Mindanao, the health crisis has compounded the post-conflict environment in the newly established Bangsamoro

region. Barely a year after its creation, the BTA is now battling the massive impact of the pandemic and the continuing threat of terrorism and horizontal conflicts (i.e., *rido* or clan feuds, land conflicts, etc.). In response to this compounding threat, the BARMM leadership through Member of Parliament, Datu Antao Midtimbang, served as mediator in one of the existing *rido* in Maguindanao.

Among the key agencies of the Bangsamoro government that are exploring transformative ways of dispute resolution are the Ministry of Public Order and Safety, Ministry of Indigenous People’s Affairs and the Council of Leaders—the



Amid COVID Pandemic, clans end decades of conflict in Southern Philippines. (Text & Photo source: Nonviolent Peaceforce: <https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/blog/philippines-news/853-decadesofconflict>)

latter comprising of the different local chief executives of the BARMM provinces which shall serve as an advisory council to the Chief Minister. Another important mechanism is the role of traditional and faith leaders in the Bangsamoro community who are influential in their respective communities, particularly on matters of building trust and confidence in conflict resolution and de-escalation of conflict at the community level.

Given the multicultural setting in the Bangsamoro, cultural and social capital must be strengthened, or what John Paul Lederach⁷ has characterized as the relational aspect of conflict transformation, by building on the existing corridors of friendship between and among the different socio-cultural groups, Moros, and *lumad* in the region in order to prevent the relapse into violence.

The normalization process which involves the decommissioning of MILF combatants has slowed down because of the crisis.⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic may also lead to a

relapse into violence, given the weakness of law enforcement and the socio-economic difficulties confronting the communities in BARMM.⁹

In April 2020, Interim Chief Minister Ebrahim was appointed by President Rodrigo Duterte as the head of the Bangsamoro Regional IAFT-IED. The Bangsamoro Regional IATF-IED coordinates with the National Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-IED), and is mandated to formulate policies and programs to prevent the spread and mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Bangsamoro government has set up the following institutional mechanisms as protective and proactive measures to contain the spread of the virus: (1) information dissemination and sharing through BARMM's Rapid Emergency Action on Disaster Incidence (BARMM-READi); (2) localized Social Amelioration Assistance Program through the Ministry of Social Services and Development (BARMM-

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7 Lederach, John Paul (2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

8 The normalization track is one of the annexes of the GPH-MILF peace document which outlines the decommissioning process where MILF combatants will "put their weapons" beyond use. With the normalization on hold, there are socio-economic assistance programs for MILF members and their families that are also put on hold that may lead to tensions beyond the COVID-19 crisis in the Bangsamoro.

9 Baraguir, Bai Shaima (2020). 'COVID-19 in the Philippines: The Bangsamoro Government's Trial by Fire.' May 29. Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/covid-19-philippines-bangsamoro-governments-trial-fire-26364>.

MSSD), Local Quick Response Fund¹⁰ and localized buying of agricultural products such as rice; and (3) exploring alternative testing for COVID-19 through the Ministry of Health (BARMM-MOH) for mass testing of BARMM PUIs (persons under investigation) and PUMs (persons under monitoring).



The Bangsamoro Interagency Task Force (BIATF) is composed of the following: Office of the Chief Minister as the regional Chair of the Task Force, 15 BARMM ministries, the BTA, the Philippine National Police (PNP), *Darul Ifta* (Islamic Advisory Board), and the Mindanao Humanitarian Response Team. BIATF is comprised of international non-government organizations (INGOs) and local civil society organizations focusing on relief and humanitarian work

in the Bangsamoro. Since the pandemic hit the country, the Bangsamoro regional government has doubled its efforts on public service delivery on top of their primary mandate to legislate pertinent codes namely, the Bangsamoro Election Code, the Civil Service Code, the Tax and Revenue Code, the Local Government Code, the Administrative Code, and the Education Code. This health-centered measures are dubbed as the *Project Tulong Alay sa Bangsamorong Nangangailangan* (TABANG) and the *Ayudang Medikal Mula sa Bangsamoro* (AMBAG) program.

Among the important legislations enacted that also has implications in BARMM's crisis governance is the passage of the Bangsamoro Administrative Code (BAC) on October 28, 2020. BAC provides for the “structural, functional, and procedural principles and rules of governance, and shall maintain the [moral aspect of governance] through honesty, integrity, transparency, and accountability in governance. As highlighted by the Interim Chief Minister, Al-haj Ahod “Murad” Ebrahim, the BAC shall provide the new kind of regional bureaucracy that will adhere to the Islamic value of “*Amanah*”,¹¹ which means that leadership is more than the position held but more importantly, service to the people and a divine trust.

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10 The BARMM government has allocated Php155 million to the Quick Response Fund of the various local government units (LGUs). Available at: www.bangsamoro.gov.ph.

11 It is an Arabic word which means Trustworthiness and fulfillment of one’s responsibility to the Divine One.

In the succeeding sections, we will present how BARMM demonstrates practices of accountable, transparent, and responsive governance in addressing the challenges posted by COVID-19 in Muslim Mindanao.

Access to Information and Transparency

During times of pandemic, information can heal or hurt people. We, therefore, have to be cautious since misinformation leading to disinformation can spread like the virus in our midst.

One recent example involved Muslim residents from Marawi City in the province of Lanao del Sur, who expressed dismay and emotional outbursts in social media with what they perceived as a discriminatory policy by neighboring Iligan City. The latter strictly imposed a lockdown, thus limiting the entry of nonresidents to the city. This further caused panic because many of Lanao del Sur's residents depend on Iligan City for the purchase of food and nonfood items. After much heated discussion online, the mayors of Iligan and Marawi conducted a joint meeting to clarify issues and concerns that had been previously exaggerated due to misinformation while both cities are

implementing the enhanced community quarantine and social distancing measures. After the dialogue between the two mayors, tensions were managed. Both cities are now managing their COVID-19 information and guidelines on a regular and real-time basis on their respective social media pages.

Fortunately, an informed public will cooperate with the authorities, and this is much needed in a post-conflict environment like BARMM where confidence-building measures between the government and citizens are still being reconstructed after decades of mutual mistrust.

BARMM's Bureau of Public Information (BPI) is managing the official website of the Bangsamoro government¹² and its social media page.¹³ BPI provides up-to-date information regarding the policy issuances and COVID-19 health protocols to counter misinformation leading to disinformation that is spreading like viruses in cyberspace. Access to accurate information is an essential component of strengthening the transparent and moral governance framework of the regional government. In fact, in December of last year, the Bangsamoro government launched a job portal aimed at institutionalizing credible and merit-based placement and hiring processes.¹⁴

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12 See it here: <https://bangsamoro.gov.ph/>

13 See it here: <https://facebook.com/thebangsamorogovt/>

14 See: <https://jobs.bangsamoro.gov.ph/>

In its commitment to open and transparent governance, the regional government has created the Full Disclosure Policy Portal (BARMM-FDPP) enabling constituents to understand government financial transactions and budget utilization at the local government units. It includes the summary of income and expenditures. Equally important is the inclusion of the participation of representatives from the civil society in the budget process. However, it has not yet been linked to the official website of the Bangsamoro government.

The “Internet of things”¹⁵ has truly revolutionized the means and speed of access to information around the globe, but the quality of discourse between and among the people regarding the proactive response to this crisis remains wanting. As it turns out, nowadays, access to relevant information does not necessarily lead to an informed public. Media literacy and responsible social media usage are needed to be included in the school curricula in basic, secondary, and tertiary education. Having said that, participatory and citizen-

led community responses are needed steps in post-conflict societies like BARMM.

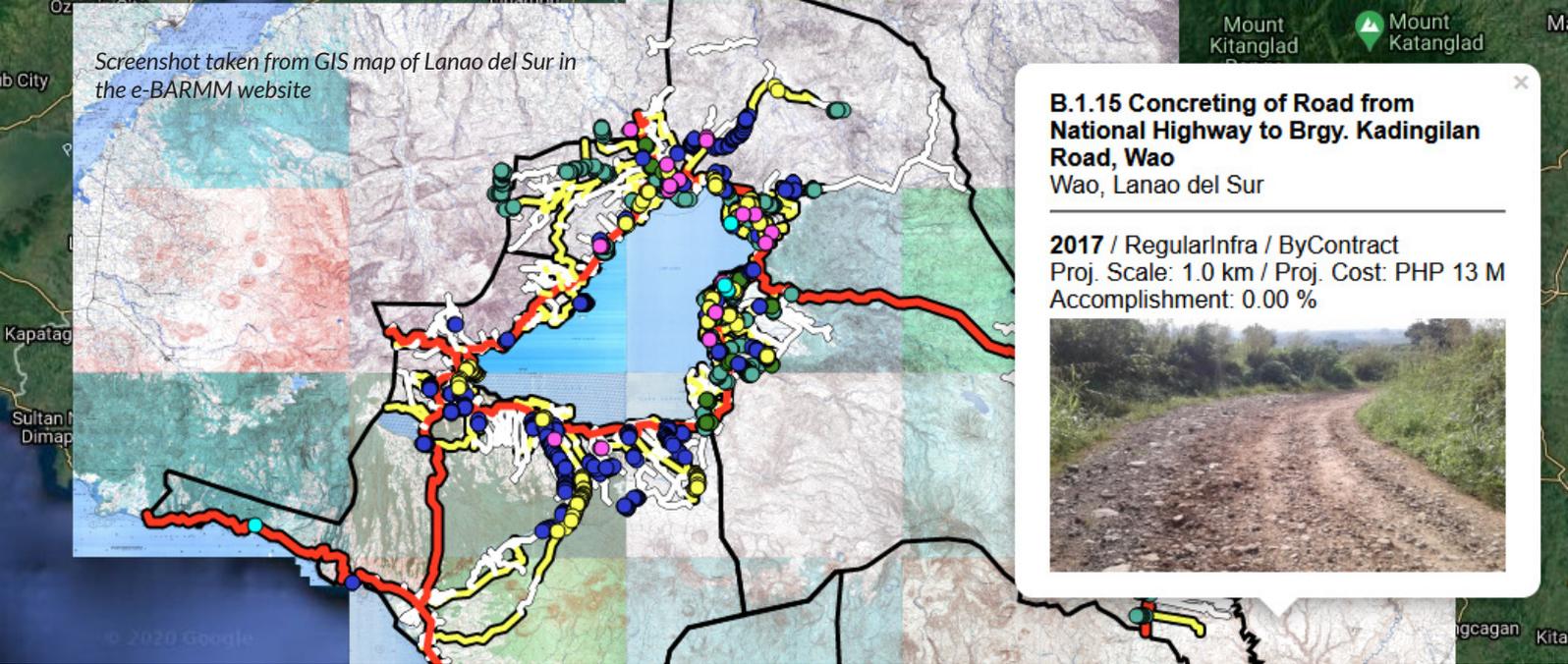
This October, in fulfilling one of its 12-point agenda,¹⁶ BARMM launched the Marawi Rehabilitation Program (MRP) with a total allocation of Php500 million encompassing all the BARMM-initiated projects and activities for the benefit of the communities affected in the Marawi Siege. One of MRP’s TPA measure is to address data gaps. Access to reliable data that would inform



Screenshot taken from the official Facebook page of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority Parliament

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15 In its simplest term, the internet of things as operationalized in this article is the maximization of the open and accessible information, relevant to decision-making which can be found in the internet. It is about gathering and sending information, and creating virtual communities as spaces for people’s participation in the transitional governance, as in this case the Bangsamoro government.

16 Published by the Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority (BPDA), the 12-point agenda includes the following: (1) the enactment of priority bills; (2) integration of development plans; (3) establishment of appropriate bureaucracy; (4) continuity of existing government services; (5) special programs for transitioning combatants; (6) supporting the on-going Marawi rehabilitation; (7) development of enabling policy environment; (8) activation of job-generating industries; (9) enhancement of security; (10) maximizing synergistic partnerships; (11) ensure environmental compliance and; (12) exploration of Bangsamoro’s economic potentials, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1025943>



policymaking in the regional government remains to be one of the challenges in Bangsamoro governance, which includes crisis management.¹⁷

Mechanisms for Accountability

The BARMM has started its efforts in establishing a fully developed accountability system, starting with ICT-based information and engagement platforms and including conflict monitoring. These are only elements of a working holistic accountability system, but they are good starting points and commendable efforts given that BARMM is still at the early stage of its own unique institution-building.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the Bangsamoro government with the opportunity to invest in critical

infrastructures, such as information and communications technology, to hasten the processes of trade, commerce, and administrative processes. These are also needed in remote-based learning and education, and more importantly, people-to-people engagement in the absence of a vaccine. It is also crucial in responding to the long-term impact of the global health crisis on the economy, public health and security.

The use of livestreaming through the official Facebook page of the BTA¹⁸ manifests the openness of the transition government as far as information dissemination and access to opportunities are concerned. Social media platforms, like Facebook, are accessible spaces where constituencies can provide constructive criticisms and feedback. Moreover, citizens are informed about recent developments in the region as well as pertinent legislations, such as the Bangsamoro Administrative Code. The

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17 UN Joint programme document, 2020, p.19. See: <http://mptf.undp.org/document/download/23565>

18 See: <https://www.facebook.com/BTAParliament>

conduct of online consultations about the said draft code is made available.

Another mechanism in strengthening accountability and transparency is the introduction of the Expanded Bangsamoro Advanced Road Mapping and Management (E-BARMM) System. The e-BARMM is an online repository of the projects of the Ministry of Public Works (BARRM-MPW). This technology started under then-ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman, together with Regional Secretaries of Public Works Emil Sadain and Don Loong. The technology includes advanced methods on geotagging and road mapping.¹⁹

In transforming conflict, particularly armed conflict that could be aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, ICT-aided conflict monitoring should be utilized as policy inputs. This is done through the Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS) of International Alert²⁰ which created the Conflict Tracker in order to put forward a data-based analysis and policy recommendations to governments, particularly the Bangsamoro regional government. Capacitating local partners and civil society groups, and even

ordinary citizens, to harness the data from the BCMS is an empowering tool in enhancing transparency, accountability and participation in the region.

Some of these mechanisms are already in place and are being used in BARMM's pandemic response.

Responsiveness

According to BARMM Interior and Local Governance Minister Naguib Sinarimbo, the real challenge for the “Government of the Day” is the difficulty with government services in the context of the transition. The Bangsamoro bureaucracy is currently working on a skeletal force since only two of the ministries—Ministry of the Interior and Local Government (MILG) and the Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD)—under the Office of the Chief Minister have intact employees, while the other ministries are still filling in the vacancies in their offices after the mass layoff of workers from the previous government.²¹

There are several urgent challenges facing BARMM in its COVID-19 response:

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19 See: <https://mpw-barmm.org/>

20 <https://www.international-alert.org/projects/monitoring-bangsamoro-conflict>

21 COVID-19 WEBINAR: Q&A with BARMM Local Gov't Minister Naguib Sinarimbo. Available at: www.iag.org.ph

Securing food and medical supplies for BARMM residents and tackling the issues of transportation and connectivity.

The fear of losing jobs and the general sense of economic insecurity for many of the country's poor are apparent. There is a clear popular call for mass testing that would ease mobility restrictions and paved the way to the lifting of the community quarantine that is believed to be damaging to the nation's economy. However, it is easier said than done in a country that is highly polarized by politics and general mistrust against the state.

Hence, localized responses are needed to complement national efforts of containing the spread of the virus so as to prevent the breakdown of our public health system. In the province of Maguindanao, LGUs are demonstrating best practices in food security by purchasing the local produce of farmers, such as rice and vegetables, to sustain the local economy of the community. This needs to be strengthened in order to boost local farm workers who are also considered as frontliners in this pandemic. Aside from the nutritious quality of locally produced farm goods, it will also address the limited supply of food due to the lockdown. The fear of many is that if the lockdown continues, we will be facing a calamitous economic breakdown that will further hit the poorest of the poor. A public health crisis coupled with economic crisis is a sure recipe for chaos and uncertainty.

The suspension of public transport makes it difficult for frontliners, such as government workers and humanitarian groups, to provide medical and socio-economic services to the public. As pointed out by Atty. Naguib Sinarimbo, the initial response of LGUs in BARMM was to secure their own communities by restricting the entry and exit of people. This created confusion in areas, such as Cotabato City, where there was an initial refusal of entry of relief assistance. Another challenge was the transport of bulk supplies of relief goods such as rice and canned goods from Manila to Cotabato. As a response, the Bangsamoro government, through the MILG, made an arrangement with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) for the use of C-130 planes for the transport of goods from Manila to Cotabato. All these incidents point to the need for the synchronization of efforts between the regional and the local governments in the Bangsamoro to ease the logistical difficulty in delivering goods and services to the communities.

In an interview conducted by the US-Philippine Society with MP Datu Mussolini "Mus" Lidasan, the latter highlighted the importance of utilizing innovations in information and communications technology (ICT) in order to achieve efficient service delivery. Such is best done in coordination with the LGUs in monitoring hazards and conflicts arising in the communities. Among other innovations, U-Report (an online platform developed by UNICEF to

disseminate information about COVID-19) and SCOPE (which was developed in partnership with World Food Programme for the cash payouts, beneficiary registration, beneficiary information management, and distribution reporting of the Social Amelioration Program) can be utilized by the Bangsamoro government to manage and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lidasan, 2020).²²

BARMM-READi as the Command Center for Disaster Preparedness and Crisis Management

By virtue of Executive Order No. 12 signed last year by BARMM Interim Chief Minister Ebrahim, the BARMM Rapid Emergency Action on Disaster Incidence (BARMM-READi) was inaugurated following the creation of the BARMM-Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council. BARMM-READi is managed by the MILG. It serves as the Operation Center monitoring the COVID-19 situation in BARRM areas and develops preventive and containment measures against the further spread of the virus in the region.

In the context of the COVID-19 response, BARMM-READi plays an important role in coordinating and monitoring socio-economic and health assistance services being provided at the regional level, the mainland and BASULTA areas (Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi), the latter challenged by connectivity and logistical issues of securing enough supply of food and non-food items coming from supplies particularly from Zamboanga City. Hence, preparedness and the timeliness of the responses are key to the growing number of COVID-19 cases in the region.



BARMM-READi transporting relief goods, including medical supplies and equipment to island provinces.
(Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/BARMMREADI/>)

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22 Mussolini Lidasan, May 27, 2020, "COVID-19 Response and Development Prospects in the Bangsamoro Region", <https://www.usphsociety.org/2020/05/28/weekly-issues-covid-19-response-and-development-prospects-in-the-bangsamoro-region/>

In the case of mainland localities, particularly Maguindanao and Cotabato City, the issue of internal displacement among the non-Moro indigenous people caused by human-induced conflict²³ is also an aggravating factor to the governance challenge of the Bangsamoro, especially in the context of inclusivity in the pandemic response. Noteworthy is the fact that alongside fourteen (14) other ministries,²⁴ the Bangsamoro cabinet includes the Ministry of Indigenous People's Affairs (MIPA) to ensure the representation of IP concerns in the Bangsamoro transitional government. This is giving due recognition to the customary laws and practices of IPs and IP rights in BARMM, which include free, prior, and informed consent, recognition, and protection of their ancestral lands against abuse and expropriation.²⁵

In retrospect, the enactment of the BOL as a product of a politically-negotiated agreement is fundamentally a continuation

of the struggle of the Bangsamoro people in charting a kind of autonomous governance. This autonomous governance allows meaningful participation of the collective, known as the Bangsamoro, in the spirit of an accountable and democratic governance, through inclusion and moral framework of governance.

Participation

BARMM is utilizing the “whole-of-government” approach²⁶ to address the crisis. Innovative solutions and collaborative efforts are made in partnership with LGUs, civil society organizations, and Mindanao humanitarian actors as members of the BIATF. On the one hand, Lanao Del Sur adopted satellite-aided geographical information system (GIS) maps to detect and trace COVID-19 and as a conflict-monitoring tool. On the other hand, Maguindanao upscaled a neglected medical facility to

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²³ In Maguindanao, more than 25,000 people have been displaced over the past two months alone, due to land disputes and longstanding family feuds according to the report made by the International Organization of Migration (IOM), retrieved from: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c64f10ac.html>.

²⁴ The 14 Interim Bangsamoro Cabinet members are as follows: Finance, and Budget and Management; Social Services, Trade, Investments, and Tourism, Labor and Employment, Transportation and Communications, Basic, Higher and Technical Education, Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, Health, Public Works, Local Government, Environment, Natural Resources and Energy, Human Settlements and Development, Science and Technology, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Agrarian Reform, and Public Order and Safety.

²⁵ Article VII, Section 8 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law stipulates that there shall be “reserved seats for non-Moro indigenous peoples, such as Teduray, Lambangian, Dulangan Manobo, B’laan, and Higaonon,” and that the government shall recognize “their customary laws and indigenous processes based on... Inclusivity and full participation... and gender equality.”

²⁶ See here: <https://peace.gov.ph/2020/04/15933/>

serve as a COVID-19 isolation center.²⁷ The Bangsamoro government also prepared for the arrival of locally stranded individuals (LSIs) and overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in the region by allotting quarantine facilities in the region. Through proper coordination with BARMM LGUs, and in accordance with the Duterte administration's Hatid-Probinsya program,²⁸ the Bangsamoro government was able to facilitate the sending of 405 LSIs to the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

The strategic response mechanism which can be gleaned from how the Bangsamoro government is handling the global health crisis at the local level can be attributed to the coordinated efforts made from the regional to the local level, with participation from civil society with the ultimate goal of preventing local transmission, protecting vulnerable communities, and mitigating the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. Noteworthy is the effort to strengthen the partnership between the Bangsamoro government and nongovernmental organizations through the Mindanao Humanitarian Response Team. This partnership is essential in ensuring that

vulnerable communities are being served in this crisis and providing the necessary information towards community-led response to the health crisis.

The Bayanihan spirit is gleaned from the support of the communities in the transitional government amidst the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is done through the advocacy support of civil society organizations such as Mindanao PeaceWeavers (MPW). On July 30, 2020, the MPW, together with the communities in the region, pushed for a policy agenda in democratic governance covering challenges in crisis governance, peacebuilding, and participatory-based governance in the Bangsamoro, through offline convergence and online solidarity forum.²⁹

Political Party-Building as a Window of Citizens' Participation in the BARMM

The Bangsamoro government, in partnership with international and local partners, plans to educate the BARMM constituency on political party building. In doing so, membership in programmatic-based, policy-oriented

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27 Cayon, Manuel (2020). "In time of COVID-19 GIS-Aided Maps Find Better Use in Mindanao." April 7. Retrieved from: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/04/07/in-time-of-covid-19-gis-aided-maps-find-better-use-in-central-mindanao/>

28 See: <https://bangsamoro.gov.ph/>

29 CSOs slated to hold policy dialogue tomorrow, July 29, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://mindanaogoldstardaily.com/csos-slated-to-hold-policy-dialogue-tomorrow/>.



The MPW's accompaniment of the Bangsamoro peace process through "KAAGAPAY" supported by the EU-funded Democratic Leadership and Active Civil Society Empowerment (DELACSE) which led to series of dialogues and stakeholders synergy meeting in support to the political transition of the Bangsamoro. November 25, 2019 (Photo source: Official Facebook page of the Mindanao PeaceWeavers (MPW) <https://www.facebook.com/Mindanao-Peaceweavers-MPW-125811777429868>)

and broad coalition of interests, beyond ethnicities and particularistic interests, is a window of participation, where citizens in Bangsamoro can shape the policy agenda and accompany structural reforms in the Bangsamoro.³⁰ This is without losing sight of the collective action in bringing about social and political change.

Civil Society Organizations Access to the Bangsamoro

Ashumanitarianactors,CSOsplayavitalrole in advancing accountable governance. The tri-partite functions of Bangsamoro CSOs, namely advocacy (lobbying), monitoring and grassroots peacebuilding, and service delivery, are essential components in the deepening of a participatory-based and

peaceful governance in the region. For instance, the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS), with its development-oriented goal in bridging the divides in the Bangsamoro, serves to strengthen, among other things, peacebuilding in Mindanao through participatory governance, leadership by mutual consultation (*Shura*), evidence-based advocacy, such as human right violations and other protection issues in the Bangsamoro.

In 2010, CBCS Chair and Lead Convener of the MPW Guiamel Alim hosted the Central Mindanao consultation and launch of the Mindanao Peoples Peace Agenda (MPPA). According to Gus Miclat, Director of the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID), the aim of the initiative is to build a "critical

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 30 See: <https://www.newmandala.org/key-issues-in-the-midterm-elections-a-perspective-from-the-bangsamoro/>

mass of a peace constituency that can help develop a common agenda for peace.”³¹ In this regard, IID, alongside thirty four (34) organizations, issued an online petition urging countries, particularly member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to call for CEASEFIRE and ensure HUMAN RIGHTS amidst the covid-19 pandemic.³²

As peacebuilding is about building social relations among people, CSOs provide bridges for partnerships in boosting social capital, thus, increasing trust and confidence building measures in the process of institutionalizing rules-based and merit-based bureaucracy in the period of transition, and appreciation of a diverse sectoral representation in the MILF-led BTA. Subsequently, monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire agreements and constituency-building through peace formation training-workshops and community-oriented conflict management systems are being done at the local level.³³



On 14 February 2020, the CBCS launched the Bangsamoro Citizens for Accountable, Relevant and Effective Services (Bangsamoro CARES) in Cotabato City strengthening the role of CSOs toward a transparent, accountable and participatory-based governance in the Bangsamoro. (Photo source: <https://bangsamorocivilsociety.org/>)

In the context of the pandemic response, the Mindanao Humanitarian Response Team, comprised of representatives from nongovernmental organizations, is included in the Bangsamoro IATF in coordinating and implementing policies and programs. It strives to strike a balance between the need to secure public health and security against the precarious peace and order situation in areas in Maguindanao and the Abu Sayer Group (ASG) in the island province of Sulu where

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31 Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-community-processes-strengthened-mindanao-peace-building-agenda>

32 Retrieved from: <https://iidnet.org/asean-urged-to-heed-un-sec-gen-call-for-ceasefire-ensure-human-rights-amid-covid19/>.

33 Georgi Engelbrecht and Vidushi Kaushik (2015). Community-Based Protection Mechanisms. *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*; 27 (1), 43-51. DOI: 10.1080/10402659.2015.1000191.

armed operations are still being waged by state forces against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). However, with the apparent lack of a coordinated yet securitized-approach³⁴ to the pandemic, the whole-of-government approach has yet to be actualized in the country.

Concluding Remarks

Like the rest of the world, the Bangsamoro region is confronted with the myriad of crises brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. These are, among other things:

- prevention of local transmission so as not to break the limited capacity of the region’s healthcare system and the country in general,
- security against harassment and internal displacement caused by the continuing threats of terrorism, and
- communal conflicts in the region, and inclusivity in the transitioning bureaucracy.

Yet, there are complementary efforts being done at the community level in the effort at maintaining peace-oriented leadership and governance. This is seen in the case of the Bayanihan spirit of the volunteer groups that joined the MPW’s solidarity conference,

and the efforts at clan-feud resolution through mediation and the Bangsamoro’s institutional commitment to reconciliation as a way to just and lasting peace.

In staying true to the “whole-of-government” approach, collaborative efforts between the formal/state actors (i.e., line agencies at the national, regional and local level) and non-state actors (private institutions, community leaders and civil society organizations) should work in a collaborative and integrated manner to better serve the people. This is best done using conflict-sensitive, peace-promoting and gender-responsive strategies and mechanisms in a multicultural society, such as the Bangsamoro, and the Philippine society in general. Indeed, this has been working, albeit slowly, in the process of transition to a new transparent, accountable, and responsive governance in the BARMM.

A quick scan of the efforts of BARRM in addressing COVID-19 shows that BARMM is heading to the right direction towards setting a working accountability system, which, as earlier defined, includes four critical elements:

- **Information** (how to make public information more available/ accessible/ useful to citizens).
- **Mechanisms** (how to enable

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34 Retrieved from: <https://freedomhouse.org/article/coronavirus-shows-need-human-rights-based-approach-public-health-crises>

mechanisms for participation, access to information and accountability).

- **Responsiveness** (how to generate response/ action from government).
- **Participation** (how to recruit participants, sustain participation, how to further enable participation, how to capacitate/ empower citizens).

To strengthen accountability, these four key elements of accountability must be tackled and enabled with scale: vertical (covering critical levels of decision-making) and horizontal (covering all or majority of serviced areas) through broad representation and participation of citizens. Such will require enabling 'demand-supply synergy,' demands referring to citizen voice and action, and supply referring to state mechanisms for accountability. Both must be enabled, including their interface or synergy to achieve scale that continuously build accountability. This is akin to 'strategic social accountability' that, according to recent empirical research, has posted better results. Strategic social accountability is characterized by the following:

- **Multi-pronged:** Multiple, coordinated tactics.
- **Enabling environments for voice:** To reduce perceived risks of collective action.
- **Voice needs teeth to have bite:** To be heard, citizen voice needs

governmental reforms that bolster public sector responsiveness.

- **Take accountability to scale:** Vertical integration of monitoring and advocacy, plus broad geographic and social inclusion.
- **Realistic assessment measures:** Because building accountability involves iterative, contested and therefore uneven processes (See Fox 2015; Fox 2014).

There is growing evidence that shows that integrated/ strategic/ ecosystemic approaches to accountability are better in achieving lasting gains. It is not enough for citizens to have a voice; government must also be capable of responding to citizen's demands. It is not enough that localized, bounded and isolated issues are addressed. Accountability efforts must also influence policies. The same needs to be monitored closely to ensure full implementation of its intent (See Acheron 2018; Fox and Halloran 2016).

One key point in this proposition is the role of governments in enabling accountability. Ensuring state accountability institutions and mechanisms are present and working is one. As discussed above, this necessitates citizens capable of exacting accountability, making institutions accountable, and ensuring mechanisms work. State accountability institutions and mechanisms could perhaps work alone without citizens, but in real life, this

is hardly the case for a variety of reasons, one being elite capture and weak state institutions vulnerable to corruption. In addition, ensuring that state accountability institutions and mechanisms work to serve the citizens necessitates citizen engagement.

In BARMM, despite the many challenges accompanying the transitional phase towards a stable and effective autonomous governance, the BARMM exhibited even in times of crisis, the long road to a transparent, accountable, and democratic governance is an opportunity to strengthen collaborative efforts of the government and the communities it serves. These opportunities, however, are coupled with challenges compounded by the COVID-19 health crisis. For instance, the primary mandate of legislating the pertinent codes has been hampered and delayed due to the shift to public service delivery by the BTA. Moreover, the actual threat of armed violence and the clan feuds in the region manifest the fragile peace condition felt on the ground.

Despite these challenges, the convergence with LGUs and local and international humanitarian organizations has resulted in a recalibrated response to public service delivery, public health, continuity of government service, and humanitarian-led responses. This includes striving for a better system of innovative and resourceful management system in a region that is rising above the adverse effects of the

pandemic. With a stronger and effective accountability system, BARMM can surely strengthen its governance towards sustainable development and lasting peace.

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