STORIES OF JUSTPEACE

Interfaith Cooperation Forum

Introduction

We who are members of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) believe there can be no true peace without social, political, and economic justice, or “justpeace.” ICF is a movement committed to supporting interfaith justpeace actions. These actions are committed by everyday people like you. The following stories reflect the compassion, courage, and tenacity of individuals who aspire to "be the change they want to see in the world" as Mahatma Gandhi challenges.

The Stories

Jahan Ara works with the Henry Martyn Institute in India, but she's been a supporter and key player in developing the Interfaith Cooperation Forum since the beginning. To read more, click here.

Kipho Mora developed a desire to build just peace while living in a Karen refugee camp in Burma. After attending the School of Peace in 2010, he gained skills in critical thinking. Now he uses his love of videography to educate people in his community about issues that face them. To read more about Kipho, click here.

Romlah and Anwar are alumni of the 2010 School of Peace. The married couple had great plans to work for peace in violence-stricken Thailand, but Anwar was falsely imprisoned shortly after the couple came home. To read more about how Romlah works to build peace in the region, and petitions authorities to release her husband, click here.

Sukkriyah Baheh is one of many women working to build hope in Southern Thailand. The SOP alumni works to promote education, knowledge of the Malayu language and culture, and non-violent mediation in her community. To read more about Sukkriyah, click here.

Biplob Rangsa overcame incredible odds to become the man he is today. He currently works for the YMCA in Birisiri, Bangladesh doing relief and development work. In his free time the SOP alumnus promotes interfaith dialogue with people in the community. To read more about Biplob, click here.

Suwarti Ningsih's story could be called "The woman who does pretty much everything to help her community." She's dedicated to interfaith peacebuilding and women's education. To read more about Ningsih, an SOP 2010 alumni, click here.

Rene Bundozan's story is one of relearning his heritage. Bundozan is a Manobo Ilianen Indigenous person from southern Philippines. Before he came to SOP, he knew very little about his Indigenous culture or spirituality. Now, all of that is changing. To read more, click here.

Kathryn Chang hails from China where thinking out of the box isn't encouraged. Her SOP experience was one of learning how to learn differently and challenging what's been taught to her. To read more, click here.

A-esha "Ashang" Afdal Ampatuan grew up in the midst of the Philippine government's all-out-war against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Her experience shaped her desire to contribute to justpeace in her community through education. To read more about Ashang, click here.

Understanding Local Issues

By Sara Klassen, edited by Rachel Bergen

Jahan Ara has worked to build peace in India for almost 20 years.

It isn't the most glamourous or lucrative job in the world, but Jahan loves it and feels called to do the work.

Jahan grew up in a Muslim home where her mother and father placed more value on helping others than making money.

"They were very supportive of my field work jobs. Making a change in someone's life—this sort of work was appreciated. My family's support is one of the biggest encouragements in my work," she said.

Jahan felt called to address violence in her own community.

“I have seen violence between Hindus and Muslims. In my initial stages of career formation, choosing which direction I would go, I saw that violence. That’s when I shifted toward peacebuilding and interfaith activities. Before, I was interested in development work, which I do continue. I still work for children’s education, health programs, and women’s issues. But I ask, through these, how can we achieve peacebuilding?” Jahan said.

Jahan went from undergraduate to graduate studies, getting a Bachelor of Arts and then a master’s degree in social work. She began her job with Henry Martyn Institute after graduation.

The institute, located in Hyderabad, India, works with interfaith dialogue and peace, focusing on issues related to inter-communal violence and caste issues. Their academic and praxis departments offer educational opportunities for students, volunteers, and interns to learn about different religions.

The praxis department is divided into conflict transformation and community development programs. The conflict transformation team facilitates training programs for pastors, peace practitioners, and teachers in several of India’s states. Jahan works predominantly with the community development aspect, which engages communities who have experienced violence.

“Many communities need development, but few people go into these areas because they fear what might happen.”

This was a dangerous job when Jahan began fifteen years ago.

“Coming from a Muslim family and going into those areas, there was no promise of coming back. In those days we had to walk half an hour or 40 minutes to and from the work. And there was nothing in the schools, nothing was organized; we didn’t know what to do with the children. They were all different ages, from different communities. Now it’s better; it is all organized and formal,” she explained.

Jahan has been in this job for almost 17 years and still enjoys it. The work never gets dull because it is always adapting to the needs of the communities as they develop.

Jahan has not only gleaned immense insight and experiential knowledge from the length and breadth of her work with Henry Martyn Institute, but she has also watched Interfaith Cooperation Forum grow from its birth.

Before it became Interfaith Cooperation Forum, this group was Center for Justpeace in Asia and they met in Hyderabad at Henry Martyn Institute, she explained. Initially she and a few others helped host and organize seminars and activities.

In the early stages of the movement, Jahan and a few others, including Max Ediger, focused on forming relationships to understand local issues in the South and Southeast Asian regions and solidify a core group committed to responding together from a shared ideology of interfaith justpeace.

“Friendship with Max has been very nice throughout this process and working with him has always been positive because he has a high respect for each person as well as the work.”

Jahan’s ongoing friendship with Max and association with ICF led her to attend a mini School of Peace in Bangladesh in 2011.

“SOP was nice because it brought in people from different backgrounds. I got to meet a lot of people. The best thing is that every person gets to know the issues of the different cultures and countries.

“That is one of the biggest advantages of SOP and ICF I feel. We have people from different countries. In my work we have many pastors, social workers, scholars, and researchers visit, but they’re from particular communities, from the UK or the U.S., all coming from the same place. But here it’s a combination from Indonesia, Cambodia, Palestine, India, etc., all sitting and talking. In that way this forum is better to discuss issues related to South Asian countries.

“I also appreciate that ICF is not engaging with the very high people, it is with the common people who are making a difference, the change-makers,” she said.

These “very high people,” as she calls them aren’t necessarily flexible to meet the needs of a community, but sometimes have their minds made up already.

“At the institute, one of my friends and I were talking about doing some program with all these highly qualified scholars. I feel that those people have their mind adjusted to what is “the best thing in the world.” It is tricky to work with them. But the formative people, who can make change at the level where violence is happening, ICF works with these people,” Jahan said.

Building Justpeace through Videography in Burma

By Sara Klassen, edited by Rachel Bergen

Kipho Mora was born in Burma in an armed conflict area. He’s Karen, a minority group in Burma that has been embroiled in a terrible war with the Burmese government since 1949.

When Kipho was only five years old, his family was forced to move to a Karen refugee camp because the conflict was getting worse and worse.

“I thought the Burmese were bad. I thought, They will kill you,” Kipho said.

While living and attending school in the refugee camp, Kipho had the opportunity to pursue his interest in videography. He also learned about the Interfaith Cooperation Forum and their School of Peace, which he attended in 2010.

["At SOP] I learned many things. The first thing was critical thinking. Before I went to SOP I could not think critically," Kipho said.

At SOP he learned to ask questions like, "Why do they do this?" When Kipho returned home, he met with some Burmese people and thought critically about the stereotypes he believed.

"They said things like, "We are Burmese, but we don't want to kill all the Karen people. This is the system, the government. We do not like this government either.' They told me stories, and I realized not all Burmese are bad," Kipho explained.

SOP expanded Kipho's perspective not just about his home conflict, but about the cultures, religions, and issues of many parts of the world.

"At SOP I learned about the different religions and different people. I had not heard about Muslim people and Islam. I talked with my friends at SOP, asked them questions, listened to them, to understand them, so we could respect each other."

Now Kipho is using the justpeace lessons from SOP and his videography skills with an organization called Burma Issues.

Kipho and Burma Issues use videos to educate people about issues facing the community to help them understand the potential implications.

"There are many things I feel responsible for and this is a big challenge," he said.

It's also challenging for Kipho when his people show apathy to the ongoing issues.

"Sometimes when I make a video on an important issue and I feel like no one watches it, no one gives feedback, I feel like I'm not doing my work. I lose motivation. I think, Why are people not interested in this issue?"

Public apathy is one of many discouraging realities Kipho faces. He also observes his government and global powers tossing around the term "peace" in futile play they call progress.

"Sometimes I hate the word peace because the government uses this word to destroy the people. They say they are doing "peace talks," but the way they are doing them is really just development—like a dam project, or rubber plantation project—which destroys the villagers' land. Maybe I will do justice and justpeace but not "peace." I do not understand what is peace for them."

Despite these frustrations, Kipho forges on, clinging to this commitment and vision:

"Transformation can happen only when the marginalized people know their rights. Then there will be change. I will keep fighting; keep doing my job to bring justice—I don't want to say peace, just justice — to my community."

To see Kipho's videos, click here.

Introduction to the conflict in Pattani, Thailand

By Max Ediger

In 1902 the the Kingdom of Siam, known today as the Kingdom of Thailand, annexed the Kingdom of Pattani. Pattani was, at that time, a semi-autonomous region of Malaysia. From that time to the present there have been conflicts based on political and cultural alienation. Pattani, which today is composed of the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, has a population of approximately 1.7 million, of which 80 per cent are Muslim and Malay-speaking. A great many of these Muslims feel that their culture and history are not respected by the largely Buddhist government and are calling for more

autonomy. A few groups have also been demanding a separate country and have gone into armed struggle to gain their independence.

While the majority of the people may not be insisting on an independent country, most Muslims feel the pain of exclusion and estrangement. Thus the conflicts in this area are not religious in nature, but rather political.

As tensions rise and fall, many people suffer. Young Muslim men, who are active in advocating for human rights, become targets of the government's military that control the area. Some are killed and others imprisoned. In this kind of setting, women take on the role of activists and work to document human rights abuses. Two such women took part in School of Peace and are featured in the following two articles.

"Free Anwar"

By Sara Klassen, edited by Rachel Bergen

Before attending School of Peace, Romlah worked as a community organizer with a non-governmental group in Pattani, Thailand. She visited communities in surrounding

villages which have seen many husbands, sons, and brothers sent to prison. Many men were arrested by Thai soldiers on suspicion of anti-state activity. The government of Thailand has declared states of emergency and increased military presence in these provinces in which people from Malayu descent reside.

Romlah's neighbor, Anwar Hajiteh, was also working for justpeace before attending School of Peace. He was studying journalism and advocating for the inclusion of Malayu history in public education; however, his activism did not sit well with the Thai military. In 2005, suspecting him of "anti-state activity," they added his name to the military blacklist.

"Because he is Muslim, he is a man, and he studied in an Islamic school, they put him on the list," Romlah explains, "But he did not do anything."

In the same year, Anwar's case went before Thai courts and he had fought to get off the list. The first court gave him a 12-year prison sentence of which he served one year before bailing out to finish his studies in journalism. In 2007 a second court judged him innocent. Thinking he was free, Anwar continued his work as journalist and joined SOP in 2010, the same year as Romlah.

In Bangalore, India at the School of Peace, Anwar and Romlah's admiration of each other grew.

Love and Peacebuilding

Romlah noticed how Anwar thought carefully before speaking, how each word he said expressed his thoughts and feelings clearly.

"He was always a leader," she says.

She was drawn to him and he to her. They spent

most evenings and free time together talking.

But Anwar worried that if one day he would propose to her, Romlah's family would not accept him because he was still on the blacklist.

When the couple returned home from SOP, Anwar continued his work as an activist and journalist, and trained youth in journalistic activism. Romlah continued her work in community organization.

In November of 2011, they married.

Only a year after their marriage, however; the Thai Supreme Court found Anwar guilty of joining the revolution. On May 1, 2013 the court reinstated the previous 12-year prison sentence. Because this highest court ruled him guilty, leaving on bail is not an option.

Resolved to fight for her husband's rights, Romlah stepped into action.

"The court just said Anwar did the wrong thing, but they did not have evidence," she said.

Romlah wrote to the United Nations, who condemned the imprisonment. She sent the U.N. statement with a letter to the Thai Prime Minister, and to senior leaders in the Thai military. Two years later, she has yet to hear back from them.

"I will keep fighting to free Anwar. If I am successful in bringing him home, other cases will have hope too," Romlah says.

Visiting Anwar in Prison

In Thailand for an ICF Tools for Transformation workshop in 2014, I and several SOP 2010 alumni accompanied Romlah on a visit to Anwar's prison.

When we arrived at the prison we entered the dusty parking lot under a rusty sign that hung on the gate. We crossed the empty lot to the entrance; administrators peered down at us from high office windows, as we waited near the steel double doors.

A man in a green uniform, colorful buttons of prestige on his breast, ducked through one door. He smiled and said, "No name on the list, no entry."

Romlah smiled back at him and went in to negotiate.

Eventually we entered, stowed our passports, phones, cameras, and jackets in small square lockers, and stood like starfish as the guards patted us down.

We passed through a courtyard lined with pink flowering bushes, overlooking a large recreation area surrounded by small shops. A guard guided us to a pavilion and pulled out enough blue plastic chairs for all of us.

Anwar stood. Romlah went to him. They hugged on both sides—cheek to cheek. She pet the side of his head, patted his dark hair, tweaked his nose, and fanned him with a paper as we all pulled chairs to sit in a semi-circle around him.

When we visited, he had been in prison for one year and 9 months.* I asked, “How do you feel living in prison?”

He gestured with the hand Romlah was holding. She would not let go. Their hands clasped together rose and swung accenting his slow words.

Determination in his eyes, Anwar said that although he was not prepared to go to jail this time, because he was here before it was not a big deal to adjust. But, this second time in prison he feels sad like the first time.

“The first time in prison I felt very sad at the beginning because I knew the court process is unjust and I knew I would have to come back.”

One room houses 33 people at this prison. He said they only get two meals a day: breakfast at nine and lunch at two in the afternoon.

But nothing is as challenging as knowing there are 70 inmates with the same type of case as him — arrested and jailed for being suspected of anti-state activity, he said.

Anwar continues to be an active leader in prison. He initiated Islam classes and teaches four times a day in the Malayu language. He also writes analyses about the Southern Thailand situation, politics, and injustice. He sends these writings to Romlah.

He has this dream for the day when he is released from prison:

“I want to have my own publishing house, to publish my own work,” he said. After he is released he hopes to continue toward this dream.

In the meantime, his belief in God keeps him motivated.

“Even though I have to stay here, I believe there is a reason. Something will come of it. God will prepare a way.”

Before long the guard overseeing us stood. Our hour was up. Quickly Romlah suggested we sing for Anwar. Everyone joined hands and sang their favorite SOP song, “Pray for the Peace of Humanity.” No one made it through to the last verse without tears springing to their eyes.

As we walked away Romlah hugged Anwar. He kissed both of her cheeks and her forehead. They hugged. He walked with us past the pink flower bushes. They hugged again and Romlah looked over her shoulder toward him until we were past the gates and he was out of sight.

*Anwar has now been in prison for three years.

Sukkriyah Baheh. Photo by Joseph Mosor.

Threads of Hope in Pattani

By Sara Klassen

Six years ago, Sukkriyah Baheh was travelling among local villages, visiting families, giving gifts, listening to stories, and documenting human rights abuses with her friend Romlah. Their goal was to encourage these families, because hope is the thin, strong thread that binds the people of Southern Thailand to each day and the better future they imagine.

With each visit, Sukkriyah and Romlah secured one stitch of hope. This was their effort for justice, one of many that activists are undertaking in Southern Thailand.

Sukkriyah and Romlah heard about School of Peace (SOP) from a 2007 graduate and together decided to attend SOP together in 2008.

“Before we joined SOP, we did not know about ‘tools for transformation.’ In that workshop they gave lots of ideas about transformation and tools to work for peace in our countries,” Sukkriyah says.

One SOP module specifically focuses on these tools. Students learn how to use art forms like drama, music, photography, and journalism as tools for social change.

Sukkriyah reflects that she and other SOP classmates from Southern Thailand were doing significant peace and human rights work before attending SOP, but studying at SOP taught them to look at this work with the goal of transformation—of individuals, relationships and conflict at large.

Since returning from SOP, Sukkriyah has continued peace-oriented work, and now works at the Peace Resource Center with headquarters at a local university.

“Peace is a big thing we have to continue step by step. We have to conduct our work to bring peace to Southern Thailand. The problem started several years ago, so if we want to release the pain of the victims, we have to use several types of methods.”

Her work at the Peace Resource Center is one method. The center has collected around 200 books about peace in both Thai and English languages. They bought most of these from Chulalongkorn University and use the center’s blog to invite people to read the books.

The 25 participants in this new program use the resource center like a library. Sukkriyah believes the resource center is the first organization in the deep south to do this.

Sukkriyah also spends each Sunday at the local Muslim school teaching Arabic and Malayu languages. She brings what she learned at SOP into the classroom.

“At the beginning, when I came to teach the children I said that I didn’t want to use a stick to hit them. When we use a stick to teach the children they will be scared of us. They will not want to learn. So we decided not to use the stick,” she explains.

“Sometimes I speak to the children and tell them, ‘If you are Muslim, do not do harm to other people. Islam teaches you to love each other, not blame each other.’”

These students come from a religious minority in Thailand. Pattani is one of three predominantly Muslim provinces in Southern Thailand. The majority of people living there are of Malayu heritage, but they are not able to learn about the history of their people.

“The government still does not allow us to study our history. They only teach Thai history prepared by the government. In the city, they [Malayu people] do not know much about their own history. They speak Thai. They use the Thai alphabet,” Sukkriyah says.

Plans for the future

Along with work at the resource center and teaching, Sukkriyah is also completing a master’s degree in Peace and Conflict Studies. She decided to continue her studies after returning from SOP and enrolled at the Institute of Peace in Hat Yai. When she graduates, Sukkriyah hopes to become a teacher or professor of peace studies.

Sukkriyah decided to focus her studies on women who live in conflict zones and join violent movements.

“Some women don’t have justice. Their husbands were arrested and they do not know how to fight. So they start to join the violence and they say they have to use violence against the government. They say they do not know how to get justice otherwise,” Sukkriyah says.

“They don’t have education. They don’t have enough money to treat their children. They cannot understand the Thai language because they have less opportunities to study in good schools.”

Her context—a community living with persistent violence between the freedom movements and the government, suspicious police and innocent households—is a rough environment for hope.

But hope is the only thing that keeps people, like Sukkriyah, going.

“I hope that in the dialogue between the movement and the Thai government, they will think more about the people here. If they don’t want to dialogue, the problem will not finish. The dialogue is the one solution to this problem.”

Sukkriyah says she and her SOP friends do not take a political stance on either side of this conflict.

“We act like mediators because both groups use violence,” she says. She and her friends stand on neutral ground, providing resources and support to the people who suffer from this violence.

In each of the areas Sukkriyah works for peace, she faces specific challenges—no curriculum for Malayu history, sensitive political topics in her thesis interviews, and at the resource center people’s minimal interest in reading.

Yet, Sukkriyah persists, unwavering in her commitment.

“Because we still have the conflict here, we have to continue our work.”

Biplob Rangsa stands in front of the YMCA in Birisiri. (Photo by Sara Klassen)

Interfaith Peace on the Banks of the Samisuri

By Sara Klassen, Edited by Rachel Bergen

“I came from a marginalized family from the lowest social level,” Biplob Rangsa explains. His single mother was a wood painter. “She couldn’t afford to send me to school.” So, Biplob went to school for free on the YMCA compound in Birisiri, Bangladesh. He studied in a long, white building with a green door.

“So many days I went to school with an empty belly. At night I didn’t read and write because my mother couldn’t afford oil for the lamp. I could only study during the day.”

Despite these odds, Biplob graduated from secondary school and university.He now works out of an office in the same long, white building with the green door. He is director of the Birisiri YMCA. He oversees all of this YMCA’s relief and development projects, including a rural clinic and a school similar to the one he attended.

Early one morning in Birisiri, Biplob folds his pant legs into cuffs and wades into the river, surveying its low, still waters. “Seeing the river like this, you would think she is calm and gentle,” he says, “you do not see now how wild the river can be.”

The Samisuri river is central to life in Birisiri. It sustains the people, providing fish and irrigation for rice fields; however, its calm waters swell to a powerful force in the rainy season, and most years it floods its banks.

Two times in recent years the Samisuri ferociously flooded the villages on its banks with waters up to people’s armpits. The current was so strong it carried away cows and goats. The floodwaters stayed high for four days requiring the YMCA to go on rescue missions along the banks. Biplob says helping with one of these missions was one of the most memorable experiences in his job.

By boat, the rescue team travelled up the river searching for people standing in the floodwaters outside their homes.

“It is not easy to describe. I saw the fear in their eyes. You could see dead animals floating and the homes destroyed.”

The YMCA distributed kits of food and oral saline powder for rehydration. Many people had diarrhea because they drank the floodwater.

“They had no bowls and no way to cook because all of their possessions were under water.”

He tells of one couple whose baby was born thirteen days before the flooding. When the rescue boat went past calling out, “Wave your hands, shout if you are there,” the boat engine was too loud to hear this family crying for help.

“We couldn’t see them because there were so many trees, so we passed them,” he says.

“On the way back we finally saw them.”

The family had stood in high water all night and morning, the woman keeping the baby warm, the father keeping her warm with one arm and waving for help with the other.

“I hear and see stories like this and I am very pleased with my work. What we are doing is not much, but we are trying to help their situation. That’s why I stay out of company work even though I could get a big salary,” Biplob says.

This is the kind of work he was doing before attending School of Peace.

Learning about Justpeace

Biplob says SOP strengthened his passion for this work and gave him tools like structural analysis to understand himself, his community, and his society better. SOP also changed the way he sees people.

“Before I joined SOP these eyes judged people differently. When I came back from SOP I had different eyes. I see people as human beings, not as their origins or their skin color. Now I consider everybody as my brother and sister. This is a big change in my life,” he said.

This change shows in the way Biplob does his job now. He not only oversees the YMCA’s development and relief projects, but he also maintains friendships with people in the community. When we visited him in Birisiri, he took us to visit the YMCA clinic and school in a rural village and to the communities of indigenous Garo people, who are facing difficulty because they do not have land rights.

At each place we visited, he greeted people with a warm smile and asked if we could sit and talk. He explained that all we want is to learn about people’s lives and hear their struggles. At each place we sat and talked and took tea.

Biplob says he liked SOP because it taught not just respect for all people, but specifically respect for all religions.

“Before SOP I didn’t have any experience in interfaith work. After SOP I realized I had to make a good relationship with other faiths. I belong to Christianity so I have good relationship with the Christian community, but I realized I need to make good relationship with Hindu, Muslim and Indigenous people also,” he told us.

However, it is challenging for Biplob to integrate interfaith work into his formal work. YMCA is a Christian organization, so there are sometimes barriers to doing interfaith work as part of their programming.

“Although we do not discriminate in our resource sharing, if the local board does not think this [planning interfaith activities] is important work, we cannot do it,” he says.

Biplob’s commitment is stronger than these barriers. He managed to create enough budget to do a Tools for Transformation workshop in Birisiri, and he pursues interfaith activities outside the work week.

On Fridays when he is free, he tries to go to the mosque to visit his Muslim friends.

“This is my first concern: I have to make a good relationship with them. I just listen to their stories. We exchange our life struggles and share— they share their thinking on us (Christians) and I share my thinking about them. Sometimes I invite them onto my YMCA campus. If they invite me to any religious program I like to join them. I have two Imam friends. Several times I visited their families and we sat together and discussed so many matters,” he says.

One year Biplob invited the Muslim leaders to the YMCA during Ramadan.

“I said, ‘Why, as a leader of a Christian organization did I invite you here? Because I want to build friendship so we can help each other.’”

Together they broke the Ramadan fast with a meal at the YMCA.

This interfaith connection that Biplob strengthened prevented potential conflict in their community soon after.

“After the national election many minority groups were tortured by Muslims, but not in Birisiri. Because of our gathering, Muslims protected the minority groups.”

A Common Belief in Justpeace

SOP has changed the way Biplob does his work with the YMCA and has challenged him to find ways to use his role in that organization to facilitate interfaith relationships in his community. It has also strengthened his marriage.

Biplob met his wife, Shalomi, before he participated in SOP. After he attended Shalomi decided to go the next year. This common experience helped them understand each other's work in the community.

"I have a better understanding of what she is doing and why she is doing it, and she is also clear about why I am doing my work and the importance of it. It helped us to know each other better and support each other more," Biplob explained.

The couple even named their son Max after Max Ediger, ICF's director and coordinator of the School of Peace.

Biplob sees SOP as a valuable course to introduce new ideas and issues to young people and transform them quickly. He is concerned for future funding of this expensive program, but if SOP can continue, he hopes conflict and violence will be reduced everywhere.

He maintains this reasonable hope: "We don't need to transform a thousand people. We need only to transform a quality ten or 100 people. Then we can change the world."

Left to right: Wawan Gunawan, Suwarti Ningsih, Fira Tiyasning Tri Utari, Andhika Jounastya, and Ade Nuriadin, all members of the ICF network, are pictured at a Gen Peace Roadshow. (Photo from Facebook)

Interfaith partnerships in Indonesia

By Sara Klassen

Before she went to School of Peace, Suwarti Ningsih says she was almost a fundamentalist in her identity as a Christian.

“If Muslims came to our house we had to be careful. My mom taught me like that. I could not directly accept what they would talk about. My mom also said that Muslims are our enemies because of the conflict that happened from 1998 to 2005.”

This religious conflict in Poso, Indonesia distinctly affected Ningsih’s childhood.

“In my village we are majority Christian and in that time there was an attack from the Muslims. We were not safe because every day there were bombs and shooting,” she explains.

Ningsih and her family had to move into a refugee camp when she was young. There it was difficult to live a normal life. She left her friends behind in Poso.

In her young adulthood after the conflict, Ningsih worked at a youth center connected to World Vision and Church World Service in her district of Indonesia.

“I think I found my passion when I learned to work with the community.”

Through her work at the youth center she became friends with Wawan, a Muslim man her age who also worked there, but something stood between them.

“Before SOP we had a barrier but did not see it. I just did projects by myself because I knew he was a Muslim.”

Wawan and Ningsih ended up on a learning journey together and now are strong partners in the workplace.

It all started at the School of Peace.

An Education in Interfaith Dialogue

“One of the staff of World Vision Indonesia gave us (she and Wawan) the information about School of Peace. Our challenge at that time was we did not have any money. We were doing our work as volunteers; there was no salary. So we asked World Vision if they had budget for us. They did not, but they said if we would apply they would write a recommendation for us.

“Wawan suggested we go to the local government to see if they could help us get money to take English courses and get passports. The local government gave me five million rupiah. It was lucky for us that they supported both of us to go to SOP,” she says.

Ningsih went to SOP hoping to learn new things that would help her to respond to the conflict context of her home.

“At SOP I learned that we all come from different identities. This made me open-minded,” she says.

One day she and her group partners from Cambodia, Philippines and Nepal had to choose a topic to present on. They chose “Polygamy in Islam,” but this caused conflict between Ningsih and a fellow participant.

“Because she is Muslim, she did not want to talk about this topic. She said it was very sensitive and suddenly she was angry at me about religion and we fought. So we changed the title to ‘polygamy’ not ‘polygamy in Islam.’ I did not want to blame her because she’s Muslim. I said I’m also a minority in my country, a Christian minority in Indonesia. This is part of our identities as both Christian and Muslim,” she says.

“It made me think we don’t need to put an identity of religion first. The impact of putting religion as our identity is that we fight.”

Ningsih is grateful for learning more about the issues central to her work.

“People seldom have the chance to learn in another country, but ICF gave me this opportunity. SOP helped me to focus on my issues. I work with women, I work with youth, I work with children. ICF saw my work in my focus areas and helped me learn and understand more about them,” she says.

Unconventional Learning

When they attended SOP, Wawan and Ningsih did not have university degrees. They had only finished high school.

“We thought education was important, so we gathered money to go to university. We had big dreams because Wawan’s mother was also widowed. He said, ‘Even though our

mothers are widowed and we have no money for university, we will still try,'" she explained

Both Ningsih and Wawan have now graduated from university.

Ningsih remembers learning to pair action with reflection at SOP. She says she sees her work in the community as the action response to the reflection she did at SOP and continues to do as a member of ICF.

When Ningsih and Wawan came back, they started a new women and children's care community.

"I am the coordinator for the Poso area, assisting the alternative women's school and the House of Children's Creativity—two big programs. The alternative women's school has classes in every village. I am a coordinator and a teacher alongside Wawan. I focus on reproduction education, leadership, gender, and culture."

Thinking, Engaging, Adapting

Ningsih is a busy woman. With all of her community organizing roles, she is constantly applying what she learned at SOP by encouraging people in her groups to think critically.

"I teach about identity, about how we see other people who are different from us, maybe from a different tribe—in Indonesia we have many tribes. Because of what happened in Poso, we have to think deeply. What happened actually? It's not just a conflict among Christians, it's some design of people who have power in our country. I always bring these ideas when we have talks with women's groups and young people."

Her community activism is always changing to adapt to the needs of the people she helps.

"I think that I have to share my knowledge about the law. Wawan's friend said that maybe I should focus on economic issues. When I worked with World Vision of Indonesia I focused on women's groups, especially on economic empowerment.

“We just had a workshop to build a strategy because the alumni of the alternative women’s school want to know what else they can do after they finish their class. So, we think we will focus on economic empowerment.”

With so many programs going, it might be easy to get discouraged or worn thin, but Ningish stays motivated by the impact she sees from her work.

“In one village, every year we celebrate Thanksgiving day in September. It comes from the Pomona tribe, which is a majority Christian. Like we do on Christmas day, we have an open house with a lot of food. During this time one year, we visited a woman in a village on the coast of Poso. In that place there is a mix of Muslim and Christian people.

“When we visited, I saw that all people, both Christian and Muslim, celebrated together. In my place only Christians celebrate. Muslims do not want to come because the food might be haraam (forbidden by Islamic law).

“After Friday prayer, the Muslim women from this group went to celebrate Thanksgiving. They said that every year they celebrate this kind of Thanksgiving. They say, ‘Even if I’m Muslim, even if I come from a different tribe, because we stay on this land, we have to respect this Thanksgiving day.’ This surprised me.”

Sharing stories like these is only one of many strategies Ningsih uses in her teaching.

“Something we have to do is make analogies. Like a broom: if we use only one stick we can do nothing, but if we put together many we can clean the whole yard.”

With the women’s alternative school, Ningsih and her colleagues often use food to bring people together too. Once a month they invite people from different villages and religious groups to share a meal.

“One woman, before she joined the women’s school, was exclusive. She didn’t want to have relationships with Christians, but when she had time to share, she made herself comfortable to talk about the conflict. She said when she was in the refugee place with Christians she felt afraid of haraam food. She had prejudice that if she visited a Christian house they would serve haraam food. When we had time together she said, ‘Now I can go to your house on Christmas day or Thanksgiving day.’”

With all of the changes in her community work, Ningsih believes she and her colleagues have grown more effective in their strategies.

“Before we did not work in the village, the women’s groups came to our office. But we thought that it was not an effective way. We thought, we have to make a village approach. So, now we take time to work with them in their home, at their beach, their place in the village.

Ningsih first learned this approach from the community organizing module at SOP.

“When we had a field visit on SOP, we learned from the village, from the people; we stayed with them, ate with them, learned from them. Every month we had a field visit.

Their work continues to expand to meet the needs they see in their communities.

“We’re working on strategy for each context in the other places in Indonesia. Now the alternative women’s school has started the women’s school institute. I have to teach economics in Palu, Poso, and another district too.

Given Ningsih’s commitment and dedication, the ICF national forum in Indonesia is sure to grow just as the work of social justice in her home already has.

Rene Bundozan prays a traditional Manobo Ilianen prayer at the SOP 2015-2016 closing ceremony.

"Call Me Manobo"

By Rachel Bergen

Rene Bundozan's identification paperwork shows he is a Filipino Christian. That's because there is no option to declare himself by his Indigenous spirituality.

The 25-year-old hails from North Cotabato in Mindanao and comes from the Ilianen Manobo Indigenous community in southern Philippines.

At an early age Rene became a Christian and lost touch with his native spirituality — something he says is a problem among many other young Indigenous youth.

"I never go to Indigenous community when I was growing," he explains. "I don't know very much about my culture. I don't care because I'm already baptized by Christianity. Every Sunday I go to church."

Rene didn't learn about Manobo people in school, either.

"In school I learn a lot. I understand the math, but what about the story of my people?"

According to the UN, the Philippines is a culturally diverse country with an estimated 14-17 million Indigenous People (IPs) belonging to 110 ethno-linguistic groups. About two-thirds of the country's IPs live in the Mindanao area. The country mandates state recognition, protection, promotion, and fulfillment of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the right of IPs to manage their ancestral domains.

Still, people like Rene experience discrimination.

The issues go back hundreds of years to when the Spanish colonial power "Christianized" two of the three islands of the Philippines, Luzon and Visayas, in the 1500s. This created a longstanding rift between the majority Christian Filipinos and minority Muslim "Moros" who are largely based in the southernmost island of Mindanao. Indigenous people were caught in the fray of the religious conflicts.

Many began to believe the spirituality passed on through generations wasn't legitimate, and slowly became assimilated into the two larger faiths, especially Christianity.

"I think it's because they were ashamed. Because they (the Indigenous people) are different," Rene says.

The effects of colonization are still felt today, Rene says.

He earned a degree in teaching at the University of Southern Mindanao and says people there wouldn't call him by his name, just IP for Indigenous person.

Rene would respond, "Call me Manobo. I'm proud of my culture." In truth, though, he didn't know much about it.

School of Peace

In 2015, things started to change for Rene.

He decided to take part in the School of Peace in Siem Reap, Cambodia. At the beginning of the first module, he introduced himself as Indigenous, despite what it says on his ID.

As he began to open up about his background, Rene talked more to SOP coordinator Max Ediger about his ethnic background, his confusion about his spiritual identity, and the conflicts between Indigenous groups at home.

Interfaith Cooperation Forum believes strongly in upholding traditional Indigenous spiritualities as legitimate belief systems that deserve as much respect as any of the major world religions. Max explains that too often outsiders dictate changes in Indigenous communities because they believe they are uncivilized or evil.

“Cultures are always changing, but it’s important that Indigenous people themselves decide when and what changes are appropriate.”

“I want to encourage our Indigenous participants to deeply explore their histories and beliefs to find the wisdom that exists there and then share that wisdom with the world. We will all benefit from that,” Max adds.

This year at SOP, Rene and two Indigenous men from Papua, another place colonized by Christians, decided to return home and explore their native spirituality and culture further.

For Rene, this was a new experience.

“Before SOP, nobody encouraged me to go back to my culture like that. But here at SOP my mind twists,” Rene explained.

Max encouraged Rene to use the three month break between the second and third module to visit Manobo communities and learn from them.

“It was very sharp into my mind that I need to study my culture about our religion,” Rene says.

Rene Bundozan sat in on a Manobo community meeting in North Cotabato during a SOP break in 2015. (Photo by Rene Bundozan)

Learning from his own community

When he got back to the Philippines, Rene found it difficult to find people who could answer his questions because so few people were taught the traditional wisdom.

In December he went to the mountains in North Cotabato to visit with a community who still lives according to the traditional Manobo culture and spirituality.

There he learned how interconnected the earth and Manobo spiritual practices are.

One prayer involves a plate of rice, water, a metal coin, and seeds. It is split into four quadrants to symbolize the four directions.

“Rice is our body, a source of life. Without rice we cannot live. Water also. Coin is a measurement of how heavy your faith in God is. We ask to the God that this seed can grow well,” Rene explains.

During his visit, Rene was inspired to continue his journey of learning about his spirituality and passing down the knowledge.

He hopes to teach in Manobo communities in the future, but given the chance Rene will broaden the curriculum to share about their heritage and spirituality of the Manobo Ilianen, and teach their mother tongue.

Kathryn Chang was a SOP 2015 participant. (Photo by Rachel Bergen)

Thinking Critically for Peace in China

By Rachel Bergen

As a student in China, Kathryn Chang took exams every year. She learned there are right and wrong answers, but no room for opinions or criticisms.

As a result, Kathryn didn't really challenge the status quo. Creative thinking wasn't encouraged in her school or even in her wider community as she got older.

Kathryn attends a government-approved church in her home community. The church's focus, she says, is primarily on what happens within the church on Sunday morning.

“I think most of our attention is on the church work. Our worship, our sermon, our bible study group, but we don’t have too much ideas of how we’re going to care about the community around.”

Things began to change for Kathryn when she decided to quit her job and try something new.

Kathryn Chang gives a presentation at SOP 2015. (Photo by Hem Sopharak “Small”)

School of Peace

Kathryn participated in School of Peace 2015, where she experienced a different way of teaching and learning.

There are no wrong or right answers at SOP. Questions and criticisms are encouraged, and thinking out of the box is supported.

Fundamental to the school is engaging with people, issues, and beliefs you don’t agree with or understand. That was formative for Kathryn.

“I think the most important lesson is the engagement and dialogue,” she says, referring to engaging with people of different faiths. Kathryn observes that for many Protestants she’s spoken with in China, even engaging with Catholics is radical.

“In my church we don’t have too many chances to know about other religions. The interfaith idea is really new in my place,” Kathryn explains.

She says some people at her church worry their faith will waver if they engage with people who are different or follow other religions.

Although challenging, through Kathryn’s studies at SOP, she broadened her worldview over time.

“I learned God loves everybody. As Christians we have to get to know people of different faiths. We have to talk to them, engage with them, and learn from them.”

This is a core tenet for ICF. According to School of Peace coordinator Max Ediger, engaging with people of other faiths can be very difficult for some participants, but it’s an important part of building peace.

“The more we are deeply rooted in our own faith, the less we feel threatened by people of other faiths,” Max explains.

“Before we can dialogue with people who are different, we first need to be comfortable with our own identity and faith. Then we can be open to learning some truth from others even if we don’t fully agree with them.”

During an SOP break, Kathryn challenged herself and went to visit a Catholic theological seminary in China, although people are not encouraged to do so in her church.

“We have a lot of assumptions about Catholics because we believe they worship Mary, and not Jesus,” Kathryn says. “It’s common in China to think Catholics are different than Christians. What we (Protestants) believe is different, they’re not real Christians. I wanted to go to talk to them to clarify the assumptions in my mind.”

There she learned Catholics are showing respect to saints, not worshipping them.

“I don’t agree with all of the things they believe, but now I understand what they really believe.”

Non-Violent Peacemaking

During the break, Kathryn also shared some of the lessons she learned at SOP in a conflict resolution program her church started.

So far the program is meant to promote peaceful conflict resolution in everyday life, but the church plans to use the curriculum in marriage counselling and in prisons.

Kathryn hopes to use what she learned to take the curriculum a step further, but isn’t sure what that will look like just yet.

There are 12 parts to the curriculum for the program, but Kathryn hopes to build an additional module based on understanding identity and tools for transformation.

“I think the study here (at SOP) is very meaningful. It’s more than I expected. The ideology to give you a new idea how to really love people, not just by what you’re saying, but what you’re thinking in mind and heart,” she says.

Kathryn feels her mind and heart have been changed during her time at SOP and hopes to work to increase engagement and build peace in her community.

A-esha “Ashang” Afdal Ampatuan is a SOP 2015 graduate. (Photo by Rachel Bergen)

Sharing about Justpeace in Mindanao

By Rachel Bergen

A-esha “Ashang” Afdal Ampatuan spent her early childhood on the run with her family.

She grew up in a Muslim camp called Abubakar in Southern Philippines. Although a stronghold for the extremist group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), for many years the camp enjoyed relative peace and independence from the Christian government. People in the community were free to practice their religion and live together.

That is, until then-President Joseph Estrada declared an all-out war against the MILF. In reality the entire Muslim community was affected by the war, including Ashang and her family.

In 2000, the entire Abubakar camp was evacuated. Ashang’s father was away at that time, so her family stayed behind to wait for him. They were the last family left in the camp.

“People told us the military would drop bombs on our house if they saw smoke,” Ashang recalls. “When we were cooking and we heard the sounds of airplanes we would put water over our fire in case they could see the smoke. We would cook a lot at a time so there was no need to cook again and again.”

Though her home was never bombed, Ashang saw atrocities during the all-out war and to this day cannot watch a violent movie without screaming.

Children playing in Camp Abubakar before President Estrada’s all-out war. (PCIJ file photo)

When her father came back, the family finally fled the camp and walked for days in the jungle. They lived in the wild for more than a month before walking to Marawi City and starting a life again.

The Abubakar camp was destroyed and to this day no one lives there because of the military occupation. It’s used by the Philippine government for storing ammunitions.

Currently the government is in the midst of peace negotiations with different rebel groups in the country, including the MILF. The Philippine Government and the MILF signed a Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB) following 17 years of

negotiations just last year. The CAB calls for the abolition of the present Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to be replaced with a Bangsamoro government. It also calls for the drafting and passing of a proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) for the new Bangsamoro government to use. The proposed BBL was supposed to be approved into law in 2014, however, it is still in the legislative branch of the government. Some worry the lawmakers will be too busy with their electoral campaigns to work on the bill.

One of the fears, if the proposed BBL is not approved within this year and within the current administration of President Noynoy Aquino, set to end in May 2016, is the escalation of tense emotions and frustrations among the people in Muslim dominated areas in Southern Philippines. These tensions may result in violence, the revival of armed conflict, and breed even more violent rebel groups.

Community Organizing in Mindanao

Ashang's childhood and the current political climate informed her decision to pursue political science at the University of Southern Mindanao and, later, to participate in School of Peace.

Political science seem like obvious choices for someone who has witnessed atrocities, but after learning the mechanics of the politics Ashang felt it was necessary for others to know these things, too.

Ashang wondered if she was really contributing to change, though. After graduating bachelor of Political Science, she decided to pursue education to learn how to effectively share what she was learning at the community level.

"We go to the communities to educate, organize and mobilize Bangsamoro and Indigenous people to get equal rights in government social services."

Ashang also helped found Youth Alliance for Peace at her school -- a club made up of 10 active members who focus on interfaith work.

Together with YAP, Ashang hosted peace forums in high schools in the region with the goal of working together for change.

“We need to help each other, we need to support each other in order for our province to be successful,” Ashang says.

Although she was learning a lot in school and sharing her knowledge with other students and youth, she felt she needed to learn more to contribute to the movement for peace and justice in Mindanao.

Ampatuan gives a presentation during the first module of SOP 2015. (Photo by Hem Sopharak “Small”)

School of Peace

Ashang participated in the most recent School of Peace in Cambodia.

“I wanted to learn something new that we can use to make our movement and our vision richer,” she explains.

She learned a great deal that will contribute to her work with MPCORE, but also some important lessons about herself.

“When I first come here, I’m the kind of person that will automatically react when I’m not agreeing on someone’s idea. You can see it in my facial expression and I always say what’s in my mind. Along the way I realized that respecting others’ ideas is more

important. After SOP I learned how to listen first and think before I speak. Do I really need to say this? Or no need?"

Over the break between the second and third module, Ashang led a workshop on peace and diversity at her alma mater for a group of political science students using many of the principles she learned at SOP.

She also proposed and helped lead a municipal youth summit on the theme of empowering youth for justpeace together with the Youth Alliance for Peace members. This summit brought together Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous young adults to talk about peace, diversity, interfaith dialogue, and the role of youth and young adults in the peacebuilding process.

Ashang was also invited by her provincial government to share at the Young Cotabato Leadership Conference about her experience at SOP in Cambodia and what inspires her to continue leading.

Her time at SOP may be over, but Ashang feels she has a responsibility to share her experiences and the lessons she's learned.

She plans to continue hosting peace forums in high schools to help young people understand justpeace principles from an early age. She also plans to continue promoting the culture, rights and religion of her people, but through a justpeace lens.

"After SOP, I really need to work to educate my people about our identity. Most youth, like me, don't know what kind of ancestors we had, what practices, what beliefs," she says. "I want to collect stories from my tribe, from the elders. I want to know more."

Ashang plans to continue her work with the Youth Alliance for Peace and for MPCORE, but hopes to improve the curriculum with lessons from the School of Peace curriculum.

Conclusion

The future of our world is uncertain. The people who make up ICF's network come from conflict-prone countries where religious, economic, gender, and race-based violence is rampant. Many of them were tainted by such violence and overcame a great deal to be where they are today. What we at ICF are certain about are the impacts our School of Peace alumni will have on their communities. ICF is committed to supporting members of our global network as they work for justpeace across the street and around the world. One way we do this is through documenting their stories and their work.

Thanks to our two volunteers from Mennonite Central Committee's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, Sara Klassen (2014-2015) and Rachel Bergen (2015-2016) who each spend a year of their lives working to promote the work of ICF and the members who make up the forum.