



THE PEACEBUILDERS

“Keeping the ICF Circle informed; Connecting with Community of Interreligious Peacebuilders”

Bi-monthly E-Newsletter of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs



ICF Alumni held Mental Health Workshop: Painting the Colors of Hope



On April 11, 2021, the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) alumni of Albay, Philippines, held a workshop titled “Kulay ng Pag-asa” (Color of Hope) in Peacebuilding” at Baranggay Maslog, in Legazpi City, Albay. This workshop was in line with the ICF Virtual Thematic Workshop on Mental Health and Trauma Healing. Twenty-three local youth, aging ranging from 15 to 23 year old, actively participated in the workshop. Nine of them were male, and fourteen were females. All participants were Christians.

The organizing team was composed of Edlyn Rosin, Aliza Claire Beato, and John Jomar Lunas, along with Edelene Rosin. The objective of the project was to help the youth identify the importance of taking care of their mental health and well-being in the face of uncertainties, and the use of art as a means for people to express themselves during this time of the pandemic.

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John Jomar Lunas began the workshop with an opening prayer, followed by an overview of the program, and an orientation on the work of ICF. The two topics covered were Making Sense of our Journey in this Time of Pandemic, and Taking Care of our Mental Health and Well-being in the Face of Uncertainty, and Why this is so Important.

Edlyn Rosin talked about "Making Sense of Our Journey in this Time of Pandemic." In her presentation, she shared her experience during the lockdown and addressed the various forms of journeys that each one may face. Following the discussion, each participant had the opportunity to paint their vision of the kind of world they want to see. Then each participant showed their artworks and discussed their value. Several of them want to see the world free from COVID-19 as soon as possible so that people can return to their normal lives.



On the second and final topic, Aliza Claire Beato spoke on the topic “The Importance of Taking Care of Our Mental Health and Well-being in the Face of Uncertainty.” The participants learned that they should prioritize self-care and choose their battles in life carefully since not all of them are worth fighting. After the discussion, the participants formed small groups for a group activity, that of creating a Filipino version of Kintsugi. A Japanese art, Kintsugi is a craft of putting the pieces of broken pottery back together using gold to highlight the golden “scars.” This art gives one the idea that one can embrace imperfections and cracks in life. In dealing with trauma, this art form helps the in the process towards healing and restoring the soul from brokenness. The activity left the participants with the understanding that, while certain things may have failed or have been broken throughout the pandemic, the goal is not to restore them to their original state. Rather, it is about creating a new self, one that is much greater, so that they emerge stronger.



Through the ICF - Luzon Group initiative “Kulay ng Pag-asa Workshop,” the youth in the area learned how to use art, whether created by themselves or by others, to help people explore feelings, develop self-awareness, cope with uncertainty, improve one’s self, and work on social skills. More significantly, in the middle of the pandemic, the youth gained not only knowledge on the importance of caring for their mental health and well-being in the face of uncertainty. They also gained a defined mindset and stronger heart that would protect them from potential psychological problems.

*John Jomar Lunas, Philippines
ICF Alumnus*

Youth Leaders Attended the Trauma and Healing Workshop through Arts

Intending to address and process the emotions and stress experienced among young people, especially amid the pandemic, #Kalog-on, through the two participants of the ICF thematic workshop, held an echo workshop on trauma and healing through arts. Twenty-five select church youth leaders attended the echo workshop from April 17 to 18, 2021 at the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) - Parish of St. Vincent Ferrer in Bindoy, Negros Oriental.

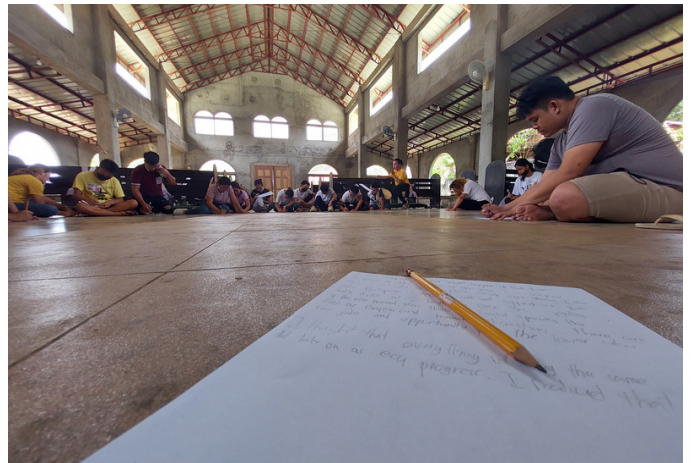


#Kalig-on: Youth Expression of Resilience through Arts provided a space for the 25 youth leaders to engage in conversations, dialogues, group discussions, and a basic arts workshop that helped them identify and express their emotions and coping mechanisms. As Miriam-Webster Dictionary defines it, “healing” is “the act or process of curing or of restoring to health.” #Kalig-on aims to begin the process of healing and the output showed the youth’s expression of strength and resilience amid traumas.

Klein Emperado and Deomasis Patria Narciso, youth leaders from the IFI participated in the Interfaith Cooperation Forum’s Trauma and Healing in Peacebuilding Thematic Workshop held on February 23 – 26, 2021. They organized the event and facilitated the two inputs to echo what they learned from Dr. Al Fuertes of George Mason University, United States of America.

Onna Rhea C. Quizo served as the art workshop facilitator. She is an active member of the Youth Advocates through Theatre Arts (YATTA) and a pastor’s kid from the United Church of Christ in the Philippines – Negros District Conference. She holds degrees in psychology and fine arts both from Silliman University.

Meanwhile, the psychosocial support activity was intended to help the young people to utilize the various mediums of art—painting, drawing, poetry, theatrical performance, and song compositions to express freely their emotions, both good and the bad. The activity aimed towards inspiring creative expressions among young people as a means and as instruments of healing and coping with the traumatic events in the lives. The exercises in arts are vehicles for creative catharsis.



Based on the responses of the participants, three coping mechanisms surfaced, namely: faith in God, family/colleague/peer support, and avoidance by diverting one's attention. The participants were able to express freely how they coped with the demands of online classes and the stress brought about by the pandemic.

Through a gradual process using arts, the participants were able to express their emotions and coping mechanisms through theatrical exercises, spoken word, painting, and song compositions.

During the workshop, an alarming situation among young people surfaced concerning online classes. During the discussions, the young participants shared that a good number of young people of their age have contemplated committing suicide, or have committed suicide as they went through the hard times during the pandemic. The reasons for the suicidal tendencies are the lack of proper attention from their parents and family about their emotions. Oftentimes, even families and peers ignore and treat these emotional and mental health concerns as less important.



Lastly, the echo workshop closed with a creative liturgy that allowed the young people to present their various outputs during the activity. Some also gave their testimonies of resilience. The Rt. Rev. Allan Caparro, the Diocesan Bishop, served as minister during the said creative liturgy.

The Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) supported this little project to become a reality. ICF is a project of the Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (Young Men's Christian Association) based in Hong Kong. The said organizations organized the Thematic Workshop on Trauma and Healing in Peacebuilding and invited Dr. Al Fuertes as the resource person during the 5-day activity in February. The IFI youth will continue to replicate the project throughout the year, and share it not only among the young people, but also with other sectors such as the women and men of the IFI, and with teachers from the public and private high schools in the northern part of Negros Oriental.

*Klein Emperado, Philippines
IFI Youth and ICF Alumnus 2021*

Cotabato ICF Alumni Held Echo Virtual Training on Mental Health

Three participants of the ICF Thematic Webinar on Mental Health, Stress, and Trauma Healing organized a seminar-workshop on Mental Health on March 28, 2021, at the Southern Christian College Nature Farm, Kimagango, Midsayap, Cotabato. Norhanie Saganding, Shairalyn Alang, and Jay Mark Ferenal participated in the weeklong virtual training conducted by the Interfaith Cooperation Forum on February 22-26, 2021 via Zoom. The three decided to organize an echo training through a face-to-face small gathering. They invited twenty young people, of ages 18-27, to participate in the training. The participants came from different religious and faith traditions.



The small project aimed to train the age groups that often receive the least attention when it comes to mental health matters, the young people. The objectives were to gather and train them on how to distinguish stress and trauma, to identify and enumerate their coping mechanisms, to describe their healing process, and to recall the good things that they experienced during the pandemic.

The organizing team set a registration process for the most interested participants.

The Team collected the registrants' expectations through the online registration form. Fortunately, the activity met the expectations and realized the objectives.

The event started with preliminary activities. Jerome Ferenal, a participant of one of ICF's thematic virtual workshops in 2020, facilitated the first part of the program. After which, Hamsiya Olimpain, an ICF Alumna, introduced the Interfaith Cooperation Forum and gave the background about the organization.

Norhanie Saganding facilitated the first topic. She asked the participants to contemplate and draw out some meaning from their pandemic journey. Ms. Saganding also provided important inputs on stress and trauma healing. An intimate group discussion took place as the participants shared their experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. The organizing team made sure that the participants were able to share with no constraint and worries on time so they were divided into breakout groups for a better sharing of experiences. Several themes surfaced from the participants' responses and shared stories. Some lost their jobs. Some lived away from their families. Some felt despair and hopelessness. During the plenary session, the participants processed the salient points of the first activity.

Shairalyn Alang facilitated the second activity on the topic that focused on the recognition of the importance of mental health. This activity let the participants develop more awareness about mental health within them. The activities allowed the participants to focus on their overall state and wellbeing by acknowledging their emotions and feelings at that moment. Like in the other topics, the participants had the chance to speak up and share their views. They shared more about how they perceive the importance of mental health and how relevant the topic was in times of crisis.

For the last topic on Coping Mechanisms and Resilience, Jay Mark Fernal was the facilitator. He animated the participants to go back to their own experiences. He encouraged the participants to dig deep from within them and identify the strength and motivations that kept them going in life despite all the circumstances that they went through, especially during the lockdown and quarantine periods. The participants went into small group discussions to have more time to share their coping and surviving stories amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

The breakout group sharing allowed the participants to learn from each other.

The event ended with a closing program, which started with a short meditation. The participants had taken a group photo. They agreed to create a virtual group chat to remain connected and be in touch with each other. The idea was to have a network of contacts or “go-to persons” whenever things get tough. Out of the event, the participants and the organizing team found a support group that is more aware of mental health, stress and trauma healing, and coping.

Despite the brevity of the event, the participants of the seminar-workshop were still able to share stories of their pandemic journey, their breaking down and breaking through, and their accounts of resilience and sustenance as the pandemic continues. And life goes on. The whole day activity turned out to be a productive sharing of insights and experiences for the participants.

Jay Mark F. Fernal

ICF Thematic Workshop-Alumnus



Bangladesh ICF Alums organized a Workshop on Mental Health for Peace



On March 13, 2021, the Bangladesh alumni of the weeklong thematic workshop on Mental Health and Trauma Healing in Peacebuilding organized a daylong workshop with the youth from different faiths at the campus of Birisiri YMCA. The group composed of Psyche Mankhin, Sulogna Rema, Renchi Chiran, and Dayna Chambugong organized the workshop to spread the message and importance of mental health in peacebuilding among the interfaith youth. The workshop also provided a venue for the young participants to review their journey during the COVID-19 pandemic.

25 young participants joined this activity from different religions, namely, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Fourteen of the participants were female and 11 participants were male. Among all the participants 17 were Christians, 4 were Muslims, and 4 participants were Hindus.

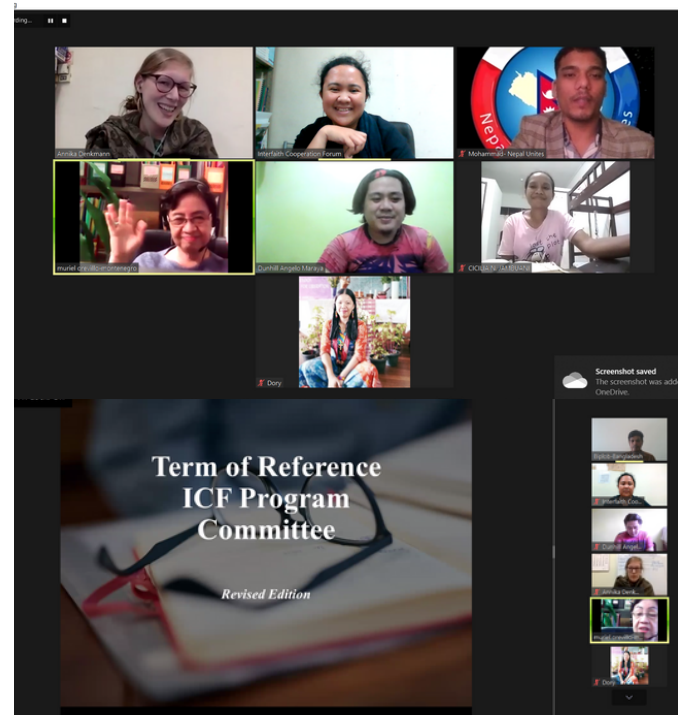
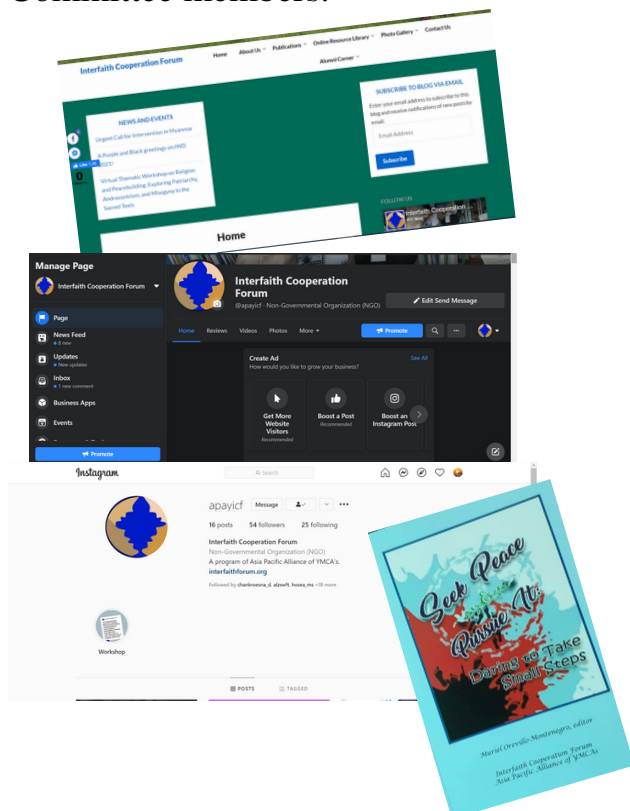
The thematic workshop alumni invited Dr. Samuel Pranotosh Sangma as the honorable resource person for the workshop. The resource person spoke on mental health and peace. He guided the participants to reflect on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also explained the role of youth in the community in times of crisis. He further talked about mental health and disorders, the effects of mental health in society, and maintaining mental health in different situations.

All the participants actively participated in this workshop through many activities such as group discussion, individual and group presentations, open discussion, and question-answer sessions. All the participants increased their knowledge and experiences through this workshop. They were not only able to increase their connectivity, mutual trust, and understanding through this workshop; they also gained different opinions from different faiths, cultures, and communities. They were more inspired to work jointly to spread the message of the importance of mental health to have peace in their communities. At the end of the workshop, participants gave their short reflections on the activities. The participants also added that they are looking forward to joining more programs with ICF in the future.

*Psyche Mankhin
ICF Alumna 2020-2021
Birisiri, Bangladesh*

ICF Program Committee Members Met to Continue Planning

The ICF Program Committee members met online on March 31, 2021, from 4:00-6:00 p.m., to discuss the improved copy of the Program Committee Terms of Reference and to continue the planning for the ICF program of activities for the year 2021. Present during the meeting were Biplob Rangsa from Bangladesh, Cicilia Jambuani from Indonesia, Mohammad Ayatullah Rahaman from Nepal; Hamsiya Olimpain from Southern Philippines; Dunhill Angelo Maraya and Dory Dotusme, alternate members from the Philippines, and the ICF Staff. One may recall that the Program Committee met on February 9-10 via zoom to review the program plan and activities for the year 2020 and to welcome the new set of Program Committee members.



During the meeting, the committee discussed and put forth in broad strokes their recommendations on the themes for the thematic workshops, on improving the website, encouraging other alumni to write and share articles for the e-newsletter, and possible themes for the next book project.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of time, the Committee was only able to lay down the topics but not the well-defined themes for the thematic workshops and the next project. This situation demands, therefore, another meeting. Nevertheless, the ICF staff had put the topics into coherent themes of the thematic workshops for the remaining months of 2021. Below is the matrix of the ICF plan of activities for 2021, considering the initial output of the meeting.

Dates	Programs/Activities	Platform/Venue
March 4, 11,18, 25, 2021 (with follow-up discussions on March 18, 16, 23,30)	3rd Thematic Workshop - Patriarchy, Androcentrism, and Misogyny in Religion's Sacred Texts	Zoom
May 21, 2021	ICF Program Committee Meeting	Zoom
July 5-9, 2021	ICF 4 th Thematic Workshop: The Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) and Refugees in Asia in the Context of the COVID pandemic and the impending Civil War in Myanmar	Zoom
August 23-27, 2021	ICF 5 th Thematic Workshop: Uncovering the Plight of Indigenous People's Rights and Access to Health Care during the COVID pandemic	Zoom
September 13-17, 2021	ICF 6 th Thematic Workshop: The Impacts of the Coronavirus on the Rights and Situation of Local, Migrant, and Self-employed Workers in Asia	Zoom
October 25-29, 2021	ICF 7 th Thematic workshop: "No One is Left Behind:" Children Rights and Welfare, and the Pandemic	Zoom
1 st week November	Release of Survey Forms for ICF Alumni	Email/Web/FB
November 25, 2021	ICF 8 th Thematic workshop: - 16 Day of Activism against Gender-Based Violence *Nov. 25 – Grounding Women's Rights on the Feminine Images of God in Religions' Sacred Texts and Indigenous Spiritualities	Zoom
December 2 and 9, 2021	Continuation – ICF 8 th Thematic workshop: 6 Day of Activism against Gender-Based Violence *Dec. 2 - Ecofeminism as Activism in defense of Mother Earth *Dec. 9 - Remembering the Trailblazers for Women's Rights and Passing on the Torch to the Women of Today	Zoom

ICF is thankful to the committee members for their recommendations in the year 2021 plan.

Baidido M. Saganding
ICF Program Officer



ICF Program Committee Members Attend APAY Executive Committee Meeting

For the first time, the members of the ICF Program Committee attended the annual Executive Committee Meeting (ECM) of the Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs. The meeting took place on April 16 and 17, 2021 at 3:00 – 6:00 p.m. through the Zoom video communication platform. Albeit virtual, the members of the Program Committee had the chance to participate in the leadership of the Opening Worship and giving a report. The 110 attendees of the meeting included the Officers, Board, General Secretaries of the National YMCAs, Regional representatives to the World Alliance of YMCAs, members of the Standing Committees, Guests, and partners of APAY. Rev. Dr. Chang Yoon-Jae of Ehwa Womans University in Seoul, Korea, explicated the mission review of APAY.

The regular and alternate Committee members who participated in leading the Opening Worship on the 16th of April were Teodora “Dory” Dotusme of the Philippines, Cicilia Novalia Jambuani of Jayapura, and Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman of Nepal. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro prepared the liturgy that made use of a song she composed with words based on Challenge 21 and adapted to the tune meter of 7.6.76. D.

Thankful for the opportunity to share, Biplob Rangsa of Bangladesh reported on behalf of the ICF Program Committee in less than six minutes, the time slot given to all rapporteurs. Considering that this is the first time for the Committee to render a report, he focused on the Committee’s Nature, Composition, and Role. He highlighted the membership, pointing out that the Committee has 10 members, six (6) of whom represent the ICF alumni, peace networks, peace activists, and experts on inter-faith issues. The other four members are ex-officio, namely, the General Secretary of APAY, related Executive Secretary of APAY, the ICF Program Officer, and the ICF Coordinator who heads the Committee. Any intern or seconded personnel are a corresponding member. A significant factor in choosing the members is the balance in gender and religious representation.

Rangsa also pointed out that the ICF Program Committee acts as a liaison of the National Forum, or, of the ICF Alumni community of their respective country. It serves as an advisory committee to the ICF Coordinator and ICF Staff in matters of planning the details of the programs following the project guidelines. The Committee plays an active role in implementing the events of ICF, especially when their respective country hosts or organizes the activity.



Then, he proceeded to present the activities carried out by the Committee done mostly online after its last face-to-face meeting in January 2020 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He announced that the Committee would hold its third meeting in 2021 on May 21. On that meeting, the Committee will review the output of the March 31 meeting,

formulate guidelines under the Terms of Reference, find replacements for absentee members, and explore ways to help the ICF Staff in conducting a “tracer study” on where the ICF alumni are and how they used the knowledge/skills gained from the ICF programs.

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, Ph.D
ICF Coordinator

ICF supported Nepal Alumni's Peace Education and Human Rights Workshop

ICF extended Small Grant to support Nepal Alumni's effort to organize a Local Peace Education and Advocacy activity they named “Peace Education and Human Rights” workshop. Leading the activity was Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman, SoP 2017 alumnus and founder of Nepal Unites, who, along with fellow SoP alumni held the activity on March 3-7, 2021 in Itahari, Sunsari Province No.1. Twenty-two participants participated in the workshop, namely: 11 males and 11 females. The participants belonged to different religions: 1 Buddhist, 1 Christian, 15 Hindus, 1 Muslim, and 4 from Indigenous Spiritualities. The participants came from fourteen districts of Province No.1 and No.2 in Nepal.



The activity began on March 2, 2021, with a Press Meet or a Press Conference, attended by the invited broadcast and print journalists, the participants of the workshop, and the community. The Press Meet activity aimed to share the background and objectives of the workshop with a larger audience. Nepal Unites believed that media has a significant role in spreading the message of peace, especially to young people.



On the second day, March 3, 2021, Shushil Rajbhar, the province coordinator of Nepal Unites, formally welcomed the participants. He challenged the young people to be peace activists and human rights defenders in their respective communities.



Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman shared the workshop objectives, the work of APAY-ICF, and Nepal Unites with the participants. Afterward, Kaushila Sunuwar, ICF School of Peace 2019 alumna led the introduction of participants and shared in detail the program schedule. The topics lined up for the workshop were basic courses. Kaushila Sunuwar facilitated the workshop on Understanding Peace and Conflict, while Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman led the workshop on Identifying Social Issues and Peace Education. An invited facilitator, Mr. Dinesh Shrestha, a journalist, led the session on Human Rights. The workshop also served as the venue for interfaith dialogue between the participants who represented Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Indigenous Spiritualities. The dialogue helped the participants to learn from each other's faith and identify their role as youth in peacebuilding.

On the last day, participants and the SoP-Nepal Unites team proceeded to visit

Kanepokhari-1, Morang Province.

Kanepokhari-1 is a marginalized indigenous Santhal community. The visit aimed to help the participants see the realities in the community and to learn basic skills in engaging with the community. During the visit, Mr. Sital Tulu, the local leader, warmly received the participants and guided them in their visit to the Shantal traditional home, customs, food, and culture. The activity ended with the closing program held in the community. Participants shared their reflections and received their certificates for the five days' workshop.

Nepal Unites was thankful for the support of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum, an APAY project that covered two-thirds of the expenses for the whole activity. ICF also hopes it will reach more young people through its small grant support.

*Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman,
SoP 2017, Founder of Nepal Unites
and
Baidido M. Saganding,
ICF Program Officer*

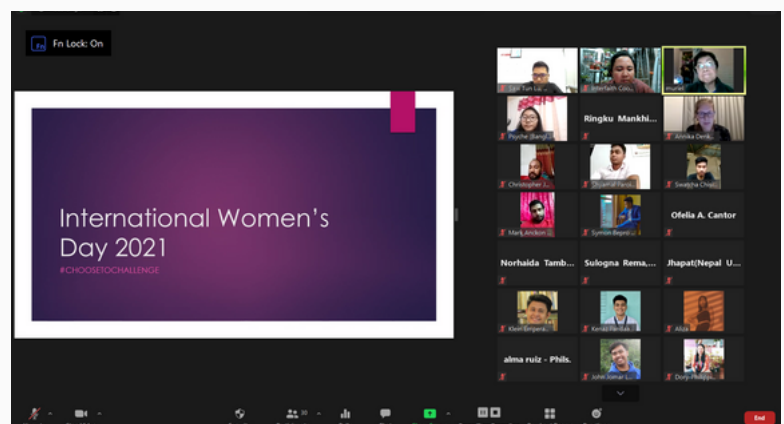
Religion Does Not Exist In Isolation

Uncovering Patriarchy, Androcentrism, and Misogyny in the Sacred Texts

ICF observed women's month with a series of virtual sessions once a week on Patriarchy, Androcentrism, and Misogyny in the Sacred Texts. Each session focused and examined the sacred texts of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, respectively. There were 4 sessions in total with the resource persons and 4 follow-up discussions. 31 regular participants completed the four sessions, 15 of whom are males and 16 are females. They represented four major religions namely, Buddhism (2), Christianity (22), Hinduism (3), and Islam (3).

The first of the four sessions took place on March 4th with a follow-up discussion on Monday 8th on International Women's Day. During the first session, ICF's very own Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro took the participants on a journey to explore the texts of terror in the Bible. After introducing the participants to the words Patriarchy, Androcentrism, and Misogyny, Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro gave insights on the circumstance of the bible arguing that it is crucial to understand the broader context to understand the sacred text. Or as she puts it: "We must interrogate the text, ask the text. Men wrote the text. It did not suddenly appear out of nowhere. It comes to us from the perspective of the writer.

Writing is a political act, whether we like it or not. In any story, you will take the angle, depending on what your interest is. To make sense of the text: interrogate it! Why was it written? When and by whom?" Taking these questions into account the participants had the opportunity to listen to some texts of terror in the bible and discuss with their peers the implications those have on our current societies. What shall we take away from these texts of terror? According to Dr. Orevillo-Montenegro, it is up to each one to take a deeper look into their sacred texts, acknowledge the texts of terror with their enslaving and marginalizing dimensions and not take them as authoritative. Moreover, she asked the participants to identify those aspects that are liberating and lift them. The bible can be read and interpreted differently by different people and there is not one single truth.



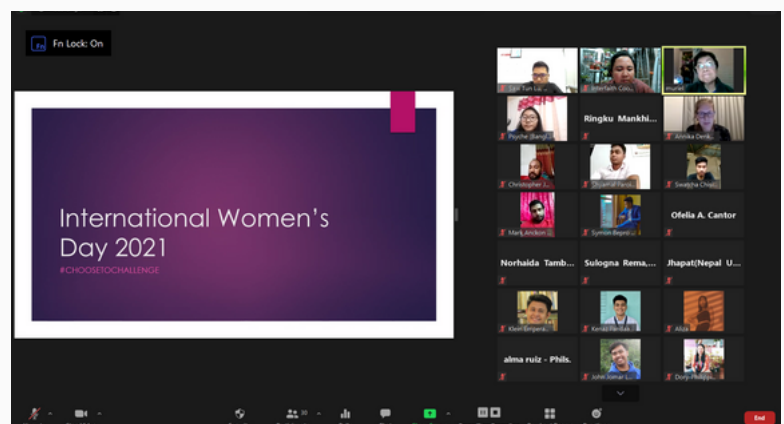
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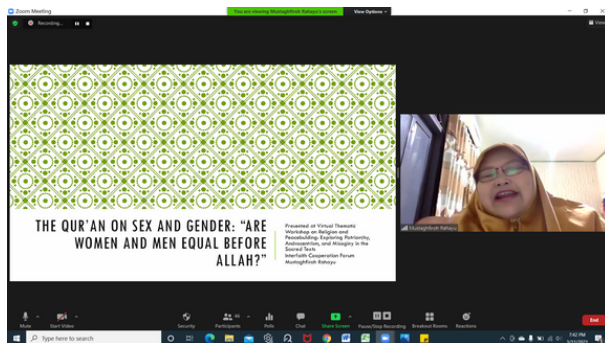
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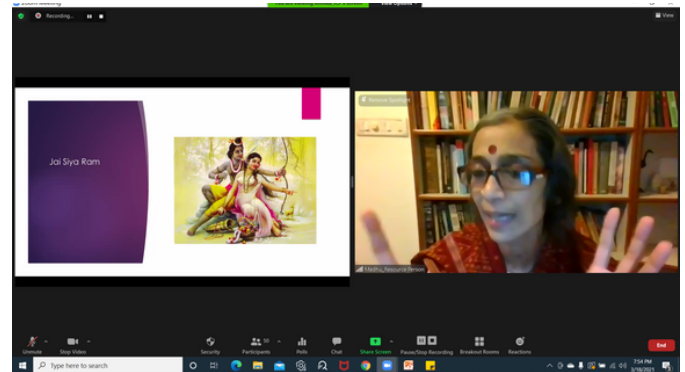


On March 11th the second session on Islam took place. Ph.D. candidate Mustaghfiroh Rahayu from Indonesia explored the Qur'an focusing on the question of whether women and men are equal before Allah. The participants were given Amina Wadud's book, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* as material to familiarize themselves with and understand the topic.



During the session, Ms. Mustaghfiroh Rahayu first acknowledged what the participants did or did not know about the Qur'an and went on to introduce the sacred text in more detail by also focusing, like Dr. Muriel before her, on the time and context in which it was written and pointed out that there is no absolute truth. She said that it is particularly important to ask the following questions when reading the Qur'an with regards to gender: "What is the implication of using gender-specific, gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language in the Qur'an? Is it a reflection of the time? Or is it a divine intention?" As with the Bible, the Qur'an was written by men and thus inherently includes a male perspective. She focused the main part of her presentation by taking a deeper look into the text and dissecting words and their meaning.

A starting point was the account of the creation of women in the Qur'an. She explained that careful reading of the text will show that it puts women and men on equal terms. She ended her presentation by stating the Islamic declaration on women's full humanity.



The third session took place on the 18th of March. Ms. Madhu Bhushan, a feminist from India, talked about Hinduism especially with a focus on the Hindu goddesses. She first described her journey with the faith she was born into and focused on the intertwining of politics, patriarchy, and faith. She linked the interpretation of the sacred texts and faith to the British colonization of India and their influence in creating a patriarchal society. The British prescribed focusing on just one Hindu text out of the many to promote certain rules to live by, resembling the ideals of the British patriarchal society at the time. She further explained the current political situation, with the rise of Hindu nationalism and the changes this has brought over the past decades to the interpretation of Hinduism, and the implications for the women. As an example, she described the complex stories and different depictions of the goddesses and gods in Hinduism.

She explained that many goddesses were once portrayed as independent and fierce, fighting for justice, and were not subservient to the male gods. This has changed in the past years as politics shifted. She calls the phenomenon the domestication of goddesses from being fierce and independent to docile housewives. This shift in turn has many implications for the kind of lives that Hindu society allowed Hindu women to lead. However, it is not only the portrayal of goddesses' images that changed to promote ideals that fit with the current political interests. The change also shifted the images of the gods. Once portrayed to encompass the balance between feminine and masculine in their being, the gods are now shown as fighters with solely masculine features. Ms. Bhusan's talk provided especially good insights on how religion, in this case, Hinduism, is used by the people in power to meet their interests.



The last session had Venerable Dhammananda as the resource person. The Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni received full monastic ordination as a bhikkhuni on the 28th of February 2003 in Sri Lanka because the Buddhist order in Thailand does ordain women. She is the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery in Thailand.



She addressed the topic in the form of a question: If the Dhamma has No gender bias, how do Buddhist women make sense of the Garudhammas? The Venerable Dhammananda gave a cursory input on the history of bhikkhunis and their role today to situate her answer to the question. She asserted that the bhikkhus and the bhikkhunis are equal. In the Theravada version, the Garudhamma has 331 rules of discipline for the bhikkhuni (female monks), while the rules for the bhikkhus (male monks). The resource person pointed out that the Buddha had trusted the bhikkhunis can follow more disciplinary rules. She does not regard this as discrimination. A lively discussion on the many questions that the participants raised followed. The participants were also keen to learn more about the Buddhist teachings on female and male equality and the acknowledgment of LGBTQA+.

Almayne Joyce R. Mayor from the Philippines summed up her gained insights from the session as follows: *"The session with Ven. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was an eye-opening for me."*

We learned that ordination of a female monk has been a practice since ancient times, the eight Garudhammas are fair in some respect and that gender equality is a core positive characteristic of Buddhism.”



Participants share via mentimeter key words from the sessions

The follow-up discussion on March 30, the next Tuesday, allowed participants to reflect on the given input. The breakout rooms in Zoom gave the participants time to discuss their insights on the connection between the teachings of the sacred texts of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism and the way these religions and society treat women today. The participants, through some guide questions, probe and uncover the ties between power, politics, religion, and harmful practices towards women, especially in their contexts. By becoming aware of these connections, the participants had gained a clearer view of the close links between these issues are closely linked. These issues are interdependent and we need to address them holistically to facilitate change successfully.

In his written reflection, Dunhill Angelo Maraya from the Philippines summarized his take away from all sessions, saying:

“To conclude my reflections, as I said before, religion shaped and [is]

continuously shaping the community, the society, and because of this, people tend to believe that their religion is teaching what is of God/s. But people tend to forget who is/are leading the religion, who directs the religion. Most of the mainstream religions are led by men, with the body of a man, head of a man, a hand of a man, a brain of a man, a heart of a man, and the idea of the man. Most of the sacred texts of the religions in the world are written and interpreted by men.”

An important notion that one can gather or take away from the first three sessions is that no religion exists in isolation. Religion is always defined by outside circumstances, by the people who have the power to interpret the sacred texts and create norms and rules accordingly. Moreover, it is important to consider the context where the authors wrote the sacred texts. Overall, the sessions challenged all participants to thoroughly engage with their respective religions to identify the harmful dimensions they encompass and create for women or other marginalized groups. It is also up to each one of us to uncover the ties between the patriarchal societies we live in and the role religion plays.

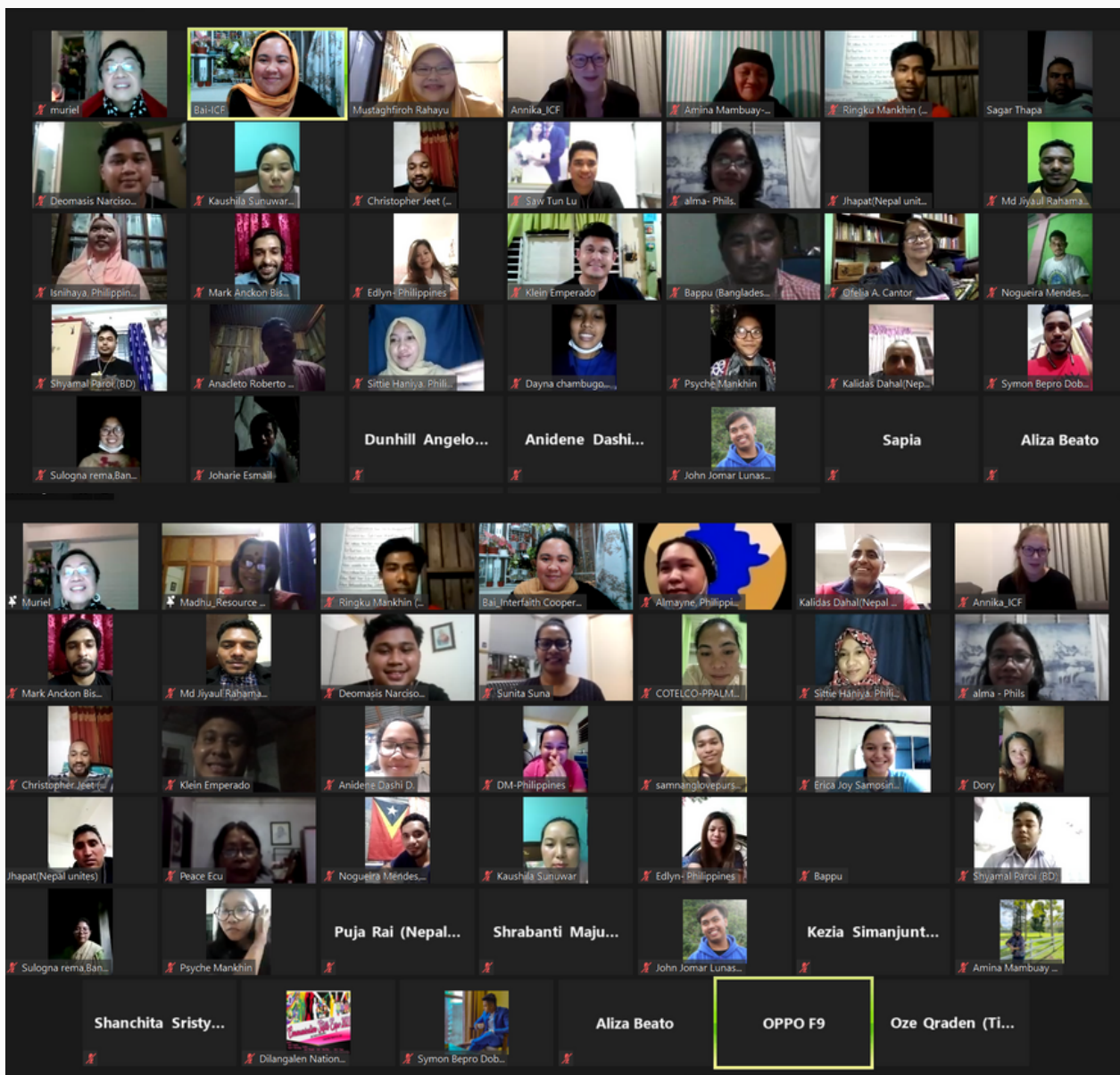


With that said ICF wants to take this opportunity to extend gratitude to all resource persons who made this month-long workshop possible, as well as to all participants who actively engaged in discussions and brought these sessions to life.

Let me end this article with the words from Maya Angelou: “*Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it, without claiming it, she stands up for all women*”. Let’s all stand up together! Not just once a year, when we are reminded by women’s day that inequality persists, but all year every day.



Annika Denkmann
BftW Seconded Personnel
and
Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro
ICF Coordinator





Reflections from Workshop Participants

"As stated in Chapter 49, Verse 13 of the Quran, "O mankind we have created you from one male and female and made you into nation and the tribes that you may know to one another." We are born equally and will die equally—no superiority, no power higher but only for Allah. The Quran and its holiness only prove that the greater good maybe mixes with falsehood for interpretations, but if you know and believe the truth, there is no way to conceal it."

- Aliza Claire D. Beato, Philippines



"To wrap it all, this thematic workshop has really opened my eyes to new perspectives and new ideas about religion and culture and its intertwined relationship. I also gained basic knowledge on how the sacred texts of a belief system, like the government's law, can be weaponized and used against women and other vulnerable sectors of the society."



For, these belief systems were constructed to guide people in their day-to-day life and to set a certain number of rules for a peaceful and harmonious living among people. Most of these religions teach love or a deeper kind – compassion. This compassion for others no matter what the race, color, and creed of the person will guide you to treat all in equity and live without hate and prejudice for others who may not belong to your community or religion."

- Klein F. Emperado, Philippines

"I learned about the sacred text of Christianity. Though I am a Christian it helped me a lot to know the details by discussing the stories with others, listening to others' opinions about Christianity, the question-answer session really helped me to think deeply about the Bible."

-Shanjita Sristy Ghoramy, Bangladesh



ICF Alumnus Tirmizy Abdullah speaks at the UN ESCAP Asia-Pacific Forum on SDG 2021 Side Event

Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY) and the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS)-Pax Romana Asia Pacific collaborated in holding an online side event during the UN ESCAP Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2021. These two organizations held the side event as part of the Asia Civil Society Partnership for Sustainable Development. The side event entitled 'Interfaith Partnership for Sustainable Development Goals: Organizing and Mobilization of Youth' took place on March 24, 2021. Around 60 participants attended the side event. ICF Alumnus, Tirmizy Abdullah from the Philippines, was one of the three youth panelists during this event. The other two panelists were Christania Paruntu from Indonesia and Toni Matthew from Bangladesh. Tirmizy Abdullah is an associate professor at the Mindanao State University-Marawi. He is also the director of the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao (IPDM). Christania Paruntu is the head of the Health Department of the Central Committee of the Catholic University Student Association of Indonesia (PMKRI). Toni Matthew is a Human Rights activist from the Garo Indigenous peoples of Plainland Bangladesh. Following the sharing by the youth panelists, ICF Coordinator, Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro gave the main input on Interfaith Partnership for Sustainable Development Goals: Organizing and Mobilization of Youth.



ICF Alumnus Tirmizy gave a very personal account of his experience on interfaith collaboration and peacebuilding. He described his journey to becoming an advocate for interfaith education as an integral part of peacebuilding. First, he recounted his Islamic education, which according to him, did not include an engagement with other religions. This always left him wondering why interfaith engagement is not part of religious education. He pointed out the importance of interfaith teachings by looking at the current and past tensions between the Christian majority and Muslim minority in the Philippines. Tirmizy referred to the colonial past of the Philippines, especially the colonization by Spain, which led to the conversion of people to Roman Catholicism. In predominately Roman Catholic society, the people of Islamic faith and Indigenous Spiritualities have become a minority. The city of Marawi in Mindanao, where he lives and teaches, is the oldest Islamic city and the only city in the Philippines with Muslims as the majority of the population.

Tirmizy pointed out that people in power exploited and manipulated the prevailing prejudices against people who belong to different faiths and the tensions between people from different religions to create a divide and justify violence. He noted that the Marawi Siege in 2017 left the city in ruins and until now, the rehabilitation of the city has not taken place. However, during the siege led by the Maute group, the Muslims and Christians helped each other. There were Muslims who protected their Christian colleagues, and there were Christians who provided refuge to their Muslim neighbors. These stories of collaboration between Muslims and Christians especially during these difficult times spur hope. These stories happened because the people have overcome religious barriers.

Tirmizy highlighted his first encounter with ICF as a life-changing experience. His time during the School of Peace, of living together with other youth from different faiths and learning from one another, brought his interfaith understanding to a higher level. He thanked ICF and APAY for the great opportunities and support. His experiences with ICF, as well as his experience during the very difficult situation in Marawi, led him further on the path to promote interreligious education and exchange.

He said: "Religion can be an invaluable source in promoting understanding and reconciliation, and it can provide a foundation for peacebuilding efforts."



Tirmizy is taking this to heart. As a teacher, he brings young people from different faiths together. He promotes the importance of interreligious exchange for peacebuilding in his classes and organizes exchanges between groups of young people from different faiths. He believes that interfaith opportunities for the youth are vital, and integrating them in teaching curriculums is an essential part of providing education towards peace.

We, at ICF, are always curious to hear and to see which path the ICF Alumni take. We are very happy to hear stories of engagement and activism towards a peaceful future.

If you want to know more about the event, please check out the related article in the March 2021 issue of the APAY Newsletter at <https://www.asiapacificymca.org/joomla/>

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INTERFAITH COOPERATION FORUM

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The Interfaith Cooperation Forum is a program of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs. It values the significance of interreligious understanding and unity. Thus, it offers opportunities for study and appreciation of the different perspectives of religions on peace, and discern the role of religion in peacebuilding. Yet, considering that unpeace is brought about by many factors, including the onslaught of neoliberal economic globalization, more people experience poverty, internally displaced people are increasing as communities are destroyed, native wisdom and values are overrun by Western and consumerist outlooks, patriarchy and racism persists, and climate change is now felt as the destruction of the Planet Earth seems unabated.

Peace is celebrated as a gift from the Divine, yet, we, the earthlings have the responsibility to make peace a reality. Although its contribution may just be like a drop of water into the lake, ICF seeks to equip young people of different religious traditions, especially from the marginalized communities of Asia and Pacific, to make waves of peacebuilding actions.

From the Editor's Desk:

The Nexus of the Pandemic, the SDGs, Good Governance, and Peace: When will we ever learn?

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization finally declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. Finally, because the coronavirus had already been wreaking havoc in China and different parts of the world. On January 23, 2020, the health authorities confirmed the spread of the coronavirus disease in Hong Kong. What followed was a pandemonium. People were scrambling for, and hoarding food, facemasks, alcohol, hand sanitizers, and toilet paper. Waves of the pandemic have passed. There were hopes that the pandemic would simply go before the year ended. To some degree, Mother Earth heaved a sigh of relief. The travel restrictions and crossing of borders made the skies and waters clearer. Wildlife had a respite and a chance to recover from exploitation.

The pandemic had blurred the memories of the Easter 2019 bombing in Sri Lanka that killed more than 300 and wounded thousands. As the shadows of Death crept quickly into the nooks and crannies of human habitations, COVID-19 claimed 3.2 million lives already, as the world records 149 million cases of infections and counting. The rolling out of vaccines is very slow in Southeast and South Asia because of poor governance and lack of funds. Yet, some rich countries around the world are buying more than they need and are hoarding the vaccines. Today, in India, people are “dying like flies,” as someone puts it.

Please send us news about your Forums, Alumni programs, ICF Partner events or activities related to peacebuilding to:

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As people stayed at home when the cities and villages were on lockdown, and the youth could not come out to the streets, some leaders took advantage of the situation to create anti-people laws to feed their hunger and greed for power. In Myanmar, the military staged a coup d'état and grabbed power from the legitimately elected leaders. Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, has killed more than 100 unarmed citizens, including children. Surely, one cannot compare the suffering of a people in a different context. One could only put a parallel to that suffering. In the Philippines, the regime has killed thousands in the name of the "war against drugs." Then, the legislative body hastily promulgated the vague Anti-Terrorism Law. With this law, the current president orders the military and police to "Kill, kill, kill!" He turns from "war against drugs" to "war against dissent" that targets the human rights defenders. Red-tagging and profiling had led to the murder of students, lawyers, teachers, doctors, community organizers, church people, union leaders, and Indigenous Peoples. Even a simple food pantry has been red-tagged.

The UN's Agenda 2030, or the Sustainable Development Goals, encompass the crucial elements of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of life. Goal 17 on "partnership for the goals" is crucial to attaining Goal 16 for Justice and Peace, which should be the ultimate goal. Life will not flourish if there is no peace, and there will be no peace without justice. Unfortunately, the SDGs do not address the issue of corruption of all kinds and bad governance that is crucial in attaining the goal towards peace. One must note that the countries and leaders that take good governance seriously have dealt with the pandemic coherently, and move on to achieve the SDGs, albeit slowly.

Long before the UN's SDGs, the substantive agenda of the formal peace negotiation between the government and the National Democratic Front has already outlined in the Joint Hague Declaration (1992) already outlined these goals under four rubrics. They are human rights and international humanitarian law, social and economic reforms, political and constitutional reforms, and the end of hostilities and disposition of forces. This substantive agenda recognized that the foundation of all efforts for development is good governance. Ill-advisedly, the current leader terminated the peace talks unilaterally. Unfortunately, the Philippines went on its way to become an example of a country with bad governance.

One may observe that other countries in Asia did terribly in the face of the pandemic and in advancing the SDGs. These countries do not take seriously good governance as the unquestionable foundation in achieving the SDGs and in dealing with the pandemic. This foundation is crucial in achieving peace in each country, in the region, and the world.

In solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka, we pause to remember the 310 victims and hundreds of the wounded survivors of the Easter Sunday bombing in Sri Lanka on April 21, 2019.

ICF prays for justice for the victims of the bombing and calls on the fact-finding Commission appointed by the President of Sri Lanka to reveal the mastermind behind the attack.

