



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 Announcement about upcoming Activities

With the end of the current three year project phase insight, ICF has two more exciting activities planned before the end of September.

For the first time in 3 years the ICF Committee will hold an in-person meeting on September 11 & 12 in Chennai, India. This meeting will be used to not only look back on the ending project phase, but more importantly will be used to discuss and plan activities for the upcoming phase starting in October. Invited are the ICF Committee Members alongside some selected ICF Alumni, to have a broader representation of countries present and to amplify more Alumni voices and ideas. The Meeting is strategically placed before APAY's 21st General Assembly, which will then also be attended by the Committee Members and Alumni. During the Assembly, ICF will also hold a workshop for interested attendees on the overarching theme of Media's Challenges to the Young Peacebuilders in Building a Just World.

The second planned activity is the due to pandemic much postponed Peace Conference. Under the overall theme “Towards an Empowered Asian Interfaith Youth Network for Peacebuilding” the conference will take place from September 27 (arrival) until September 30 (departure) in Chiangmai, Thailand. This conference aims to provide a platform, for a certain number of selected ICF Alumni per country, to present their engagement for peace and to discuss issues that are posing threats to peace and harmony in Asia. Aside from ICF Alumni, Peace Practitioners from other organisation are invited as well to foster further discussions and bring different perspectives. ICF is looking forward to a fruitful and engaging conference, that will motivate and inspire ICF Alumni and other guests alike to continue their work for just peace in Asia.

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14 youths from Nine Asian Countries commit to be peacebuilders



14 young people from nine countries participate in the second School of Peace (SoP) in Bali, Indonesia. The School of Peace runs from May 15, 2023 to July 13, 2023. These youths come from Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Vietnam, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Timor-Leste. The Interfaith Cooperation Forum, a project of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs organizes the School of Peace, the first one being held in Nepal from February to March, 2023. The participants are from different religious backgrounds namely Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. Some do not belong to any religion. The main objective of the SoP is to prepare the youth to be change-agents and peacebuilders in their communities. This program runs for 60 days in three different venues: first Puri Saron Madangan second 5-Day Community Immersion in Blimbingsari Village and third and last venue in Dyanapura City Hotel in Badung, Bali.

In this program participants learn, among other things, about the tools of conflict analysis, peace, principles of negotiation, mediation and conciliation, understanding trauma, different religions, people's impact on mother earth, nonviolent communication, journalism, mental health, and LGBTQI+ struggles.

"I've been fed a whole lot of new knowledge for the past 5 weeks in the SoP. This would truly help me become a better student-leader advocating for peace when I go back to my country," Jaci, a participant from the Philippines shared.

After completion of the program, the participants will go back to contribute to their respective organizations and countries in creating sustainable peace and inspire social change.

*Santoshi Wagle,
SoP Participant from Nepal*



SoP participants taking part in the "Thursdays in Black" campaign from the World Council of Churches showing respect for women who are resilient in the face of injustice and violence.

©ICF.



SoP participants engaging in an activity during the session on Nonviolent Communication. ©ICF.



Bangladesh ICF National Forum holds Workshop on HR and NVC

On May 24-26, 2023, the Bangladesh ICF national forum organized a two-day workshop on Human Rights & Nonviolent Communication. The forum took place at the Training Centre of Caritas Mymensingh region in Mymensingh City. Out of fifteen (15) participants, seven were males and eight were females. There were nine Christians, four Muslims, one Hindu, and one Buddhist. The project aims to equip the youth with knowledge and skills to speak out against injustices, to claim for equal human rights, and to introduce nonviolent communication among young people as a new tool of healthy communication. The project also seeks to encourage the youth to become advocates for peacebuilding initiatives in their respective communities. This small project gets support from the Interfaith Cooperation Forum's (ICF) Small Grant for Local Peace Education, Advocacy, and Networking.

The two-day workshop was divided into three parts. The first part covered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Human Rights crisis in Bangladesh, and sharing of experiences in working with refugees in Bangladesh. The second part was about experiencing the life of vulnerable street children and reflection among youth participants. The third part covered the introduction to NVC as a "A language of heart."

The activity started in the evening of May 24 with welcome greetings from Mr. Rinku Mankhin, the organizer of the activity on behalf of the ICF national forum of Bangladesh. He introduced the program flow, the activities of ICF, and of the ICF national forum of Bangladesh.

On May 25, Mr. Rangsa Dhrubo introduced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights related protocols. He presented a short documentary on Human rights violations that effectively helped the participants to understand the value of respecting human rights.



Sulogna facilitating the topic of human rights violations in Bangladesh. ©ICF National Forum Bangladesh.

Ms. Sulogna Rema facilitated on the topic of the ongoing violations of human rights in Bangladesh. The participants formed small groups to identify the current situation of the human rights crisis in Bangladesh. This was followed by sharing, and Ms. Rema also shared her experiences in working with refugees in Bangladesh. She highlighted the current situation of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

In the afternoon, the participants went to the Alokita Shisu project office of Caritas Mymensingh to meet with the street children. The Street Children shared their life stories with the participants on their being deprived of their basic human rights in their everyday life.

In the morning of May 26, Rinku Mankhin presented the Nonviolent Communication as a new way of communication. He pointed out how Nonviolent Communication, as a practical and learnable process, leads people to communicate with themselves and others in a spirit of empathy and honesty. He discussed the NVC model, the obstacle to honesty, the principles of NVC, and the four key components of the NVC, namely: Observation, Feelings, Need and Request. NVC helped youth participants to express their own needs, desires, and values to fulfill these by considering others from the heart.



Participants of the workshop engaging in the four ears activity.
©ICF National Forum Bangladesh.

Moreover, Mankhin briefly introduced the NVC language with Jackal and Giraffe as symbols. This was followed with the participants going through the exercise of the giraffe-jackal conversations. The activity ended with reflections by the participants and closing remarks from Ms. Rema.

Rinku Barnabas Mankhin
Alumni of ICF SoP 2019



Group picture with all the participants of the Workshop on Human Rights & Nonviolent Communication.
©ICF National Forum Bangladesh.

A Teacher, Activist, and Torchbearer of Resistance

"Where there is power, there is resistance." - Michel Foucault

The history of the world is the history of power, its abuse, and resistance against that abuse. The exploitation of marginalized and weak individuals is a common occurrence in settings where human rights and liberties are not cultivated and cherished. Amidst these exploitations, there are always courageous individuals who stand against injustice, becoming voices for the exploited and symbols of resistance.

In January of this year, I had the opportunity to be part of SoP Nepal (School of Peace, 2023) in Nepal.

This life-changing training gave me the chance to meet and spend time with vibrant and impactful young peace activists from across the globe. During the training, I was fortunate enough to meet a fellow participant from the Philippines named Jeany Rose Hayahay. Rose, also known as "T'ser Rose" or Teacher Rose to the Lumad tribal people, works as a volunteer teacher and human rights activist to defend the rights of the Lumad people in the southern Philippines.

From 2018 to 2021, Jeany Rose Hayahay remained associated with the "Lumad Bakwit School" and has since been part of the struggle to defend children's right to education and the rights of indigenous people over their land.





The circumstances under which she worked as a teacher were often dangerous and life-threatening. The tribal areas where she teaches are rich in natural resources, and state authorities and corporate powers desired the tribal land for exploitation. In 2018, the Philippines was declared the most dangerous country for land and environmental rights defenders by Global Witness, reflecting the severity of the circumstances under which Rose works as a volunteer teacher. Many Lumad schools received direct and indirect threats to shut down, were red-tagged by authorities, and considered training grounds for rebels. Rose, as a teacher and defender of children's right to education, faced consequences herself. She was framed with false allegations by authorities, her mother was abducted, and she lost many fellow volunteers on her journey. In February of last year, one of her closest friends and fellow volunteer, Chad Booc, was massacred by authorities for his activism in support of the right to education for Lumad children. Despite constant risk, Rose continued to resist the violation of children's and tribal rights.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Non-violence is the weapon of the strong." Rose proved to be a strong and resilient advocate by adhering to non-violent means of resistance against violent oppression.

In May of this year, Rose was nominated as one of the winners of the "Human Rights Defenders at Risk Award 2023" by Front Line Defenders. She was nominated from the Asia and Pacific region alongside four other laureates representing different regions of the world. All the award recipients gathered in Dublin, Ireland to receive the award, which served as an appreciation of her work in advocating for the rights of tribal children's education and the rights of tribal people to live with dignity on their lands. Rose serves as the spokesperson for the "Save Our Schools (SOS)" network, a collaboration of educational and human rights workers dedicated to the rights of tribal children's education in the Philippines.

SOS focuses on resisting militarization and attacks on schools for tribal people. The SOS network expressed joy at Rose receiving this award and stated, "Hayahay's work has made her a target of harassment and threats from the military. She has been red-tagged, had her home raided, and been subjected to online harassment. Despite the risks, Hayahay continues to speak out for the rights of children in Mindanao."

During her acceptance speech, Rose dedicated the award to all the victims of human rights abuses, including her fellow Lumad volunteer teachers Chad Booc and Jurain Ngujo, who were both massacred by the Philippines Military, as well as to her co-teachers and students facing false charges, fellow activists, indigenous children who lost their lives defending their ancestral land, and to the people they served.



Dublin, Ireland - Rose during her speech for the Human Rights Defenders at Risk Award 2023. ©Courtesy of Rose Hayahay.

Rose also expressed her grief and concern about the human rights violations happening against the Lumad tribal people. She emphasized, "The human rights situation in the Philippines is dire. Killings, enforced disappearances, trumped-up charges, and 'red tagging' are rampant. The Lumads have been displaced from their ancestral lands, denied access to education and healthcare, and subjected to violence and intimidation. The Philippine Government has destroyed and forcibly shut down 216 indigenous community schools, disenfranchising 10,000 indigenous learners."



Despite all the setbacks and barriers she has faced, Rose's resilience reminds me of education rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from my country, Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai. Like Malala, who stood for the right to education for women in Swat under siege by the Taliban, Rose faced the militarization imposed by state authorities. Rose continues to fight for the rights of oppressed tribal people and remains steadfast in her struggle.

In her speech, she declared that no amount of radicalization would deter her activism, stating, "I will not be silenced. I will continue to stand and defend human rights alongside other human rights defenders, even if it means living under the threat of life, self-doubt, uncertainty, unease, and sacrifices." It was an honor for me to be a part of SoP 23, Nepal, with Rose. I found her to be a calm and humble individual with a strong belief in the sanctity of human rights. She firmly believes that all humans are equal and that no one is entitled to deprive others of their basic rights and dignity.

Often, we view activists as solely defined by their activism, but spending time with Rose helped me realize that activists, despite facing violent setbacks in life, are as human as anyone else. I discovered that Rose is fun-loving, enjoys dancing and singing with friends, and has a vibrant taste for clothing and food. She is as lively and bright as any other individual but with an extra love for people and heightened sensitivity towards the violation of the rights of the oppressed.

My fondest memory with Rose was when we were cooking partners, preparing dessert for the last feast of SoP Nepal 23 Cohort. Her presence helped me refine myself as a human and as a human rights activist.

In conclusion, I would like to say that many of us want people to stand up against oppression and strive to make this world a more livable place. However, we often prefer that someone else or their family members take on that role. Rose chose to be that person herself. I wish her good luck in her upcoming struggles and hope that she continues to inspire others as she has inspired me.

*Shaloom Naeem Gill,
Pakistan*



Dublin, Ireland - Rose at the Front Line Defenders Award. ©Courtesy of Rose Hayahay.





Reflections from ICF Alumni

Facilitator learns from participants

On May 24-26, the ICF national forum of Bangladesh conducted a two-day workshop on Nonviolent Communication and Human Rights at the Mymensingh Caritas Regional Office. 15 young participants from different religions and communities attended the workshop. It was a wonderful time with them.

In that workshop, I listed the Human rights Current situation in Bangladesh and shared an experienced work with Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. At the beginning of the session, I showed a documentary video about the current human rights situation and violations in Bangladesh. The participants were divided into three groups and they presented the issues of human rights violations in Bangladesh. Participants actively shared their work and thoughts. Later in the session, I shared my experiences of working with refugees, along with the thoughts of people in our country about refugees.

It was a great experience for me, because it gave me a new opportunity to discover myself after joining the School of Peace in Nepal in 2023. It was a great platform where I can share my thoughts and receive other people's thoughts also. I was thrilled when one of the participants said, "We only hear that Rohingyas are ferocious, but we never realize that this is what we Bangladeshi people think. No one wants to be a refugee. Everyone wants a place of their own." Then I felt that I was also learning a lot from them. I was very honored to get the opportunity.

*Sulogna Rema,
Alumni of ICF SoP 2023*

Alum gains Confidence in Facilitating

During the Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication workshop on May 24-26, 2023, organized by the ICF national forum of Bangladesh in Mymensingh, I facilitated and shared on the Journey of Human Rights to help people to connect themselves with their rights as human beings.



*Dhrubo sharing his journey with the topic of human rights. ©ICF
National Forum Bangladesh.*

The participants took part in the sharing session with full of energy and dedication to learning. Also, they shared their life experience in relation with human rights.

The workshop was arranged to help the participants deepen and strengthen their knowledge and understanding of the conduct of UN UDHR, Articles of UDHR, Civil & Political, Child Rights, etc. The Workshop gave me a chance to improve and enhance my facilitation skills and gave me more confidence in

interacting with and speaking in front of the public. It was my first time in facilitating and sharing my learning experience with local youth after completing the Training of Trainers on Human Rights and Advocacy. I felt joy and amazement.



*Dhrubo Rangsa,
Alumni of ICF Peace institute 2022*



Reflection: My take aways from the training of community facilitators on Mental Health

Mental health is a crucial area that demands both attention and action, necessitating not only support but also vocal leadership and guidance.

On April 22 and 23 2023, I had the privilege of both facilitating and participating in a two-day Mental Health Training for Community Facilitators. The training took place at the Taysan Multipurpose Hall in Legazpi City and brought together a diverse group of eight participants from various communities in Bicol, such as the municipalities of Legazpi City, Daraga, and Naga City, and Taysan. Prior to the event, the participants underwent assessments and interviews to gauge their interest in the training. Out of the intended ten individuals, seven females and one male actively took part in the training.

One of the notable highlights of the training was the insightful discussion led by Ms. Jellie Anne Reyes, a registered psychometrician. During the sessions, we did not only listen to the speaker, but also had the opportunity to express our thoughts and feelings. Hearing the perspectives and experiences of other participants made me realize that we can all relate to one another, broadening my perspective on various matters.

Throughout the training, I learned that each of us has a distinct persona. It became evident that individuals wear different masks depending on the people or groups they are with. In one workshop, we were asked to draw a mask, representing the version of ourselves we show to others on one side, and our true selves on the other side. This exercise highlighted the normality of presenting different aspects of ourselves based on social expectations. However, it also emphasized the importance of remaining open and authentic, not concealing parts of ourselves that hinder us from being true to who we are. Being open allows us to explore and discover more about our own identities.



Legazpi City - Participants engaging in group work during the training. ©ICF Alumni Albay.



Legazpi City - Participants dismantling myths about mental health. ©ICF Alumni Albay.

Additionally, I gained knowledge about mental health myths and facts during the training. For instance, it was emphasized that having a mental health condition does not equate to low intelligence or a predisposition to violence and unpredictability. I also learned about protective and risk factors. For example, if a student fails a subject at school and their parents respond with comfort and encouragement, it acts as a protective factor. Thus, alleviating the child's stress and fostering feelings of love and support. Conversely, if the parents scold the child, it becomes a risk factor, negatively impacting the child's emotional and mental well-being.



Several activities from the training resonated with me, such as drawing our coping mechanisms for stress on a large sheet of paper. Some participants drew food, while others depicted social media or watching Korean dramas, which I could relate as well. Before the training concluded, each participant was asked to write down their advocacy for mental health as community leaders. The slogans and meanings behind these advocacies, which were later presented to everyone, were truly inspiring and thought-provoking.



Legazpi City - Participants showing their output from group work during the training. ©ICF Alumni Albay.

I strongly believe that mental health is as crucial as physical health. It is vital for more people, especially for the youth of today; for them to become aware of its significance. By doing so, they could not only help themselves, but also support others who may be dealing with mental health issues. Another important takeaway from the training was the value of listening without judgment, or invalidation when someone is trying to express themselves.

*Kharinna De Leon,
Philippines*

From Historical Struggles to Inclusive Futures: Reflections on Blimbingsari's Transformative Journey

In this reflection, I will delve into my personal experience during the community immersion in Blimbingsari, a village that has undergone a remarkable transformation from being considered unwanted to becoming a thriving church community. Through engaging in conversations with community members, particularly Mr. Wayan Murtiyasa, the secretary of the tourism committee, I gained valuable insights into the village's past struggles and aspirations for a more inclusive future.

Blimbingsari's path to prosperity has not been without its challenges. In the not-so-distant past, the village experienced neglect and exclusion. Lack of access to basic amenities and economic opportunities plagued the community. However, the tide began to turn when visionary leaders emerged, paving the way for collaboration and change. Notably, the efforts of Mr. Ketut Suyaga, a revered church leader, in partnership with the village head of Blimbingsari, revitalized the community and propelled it towards newfound success. Their joint initiatives led to significant improvements in infrastructure, such as the provision of water through appropriate technology and the development of well-connected roads.

Central to Blimbingsari's unique fabric is the practice of endogamy, where residents predominantly marry within the village. This tradition has forged deep bonds and fostered a profound sense of familial unity among the residents. Interwoven through generations, the ties of kinship create a closely-knit community where support, cooperation, and shared values thrive.



It is within this backdrop of strong relationships that the village holds the potential for embracing inclusivity and extending its warmth beyond its current boundaries.

In my conversations with Mr. Wayan, I shared my vision of Blimbingsari opening its doors to individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. While the village is presently 100% Christian, Mr. Wayan expressed agreement with the notion of fostering inclusivity. He acknowledged the village's religious composition but also embraced the possibility of welcoming individuals from other faiths. This shared vision signals a promising step forward on Blimbingsari's transformative journey.

As I incorporate my interest in religious studies in revisiting the history and envisioning the future of Blimbingsari, Marianne Moyaert's concept of Fragile Identity sheds light on the notion that identity is not fixed but subject to external influences and internal tensions. Blimbingsari's potential embrace of inclusivity exemplifies its willingness to adapt and evolve while staying rooted in its religious foundations. Drawing from Paul Ricoeur's Narrative Identity Theory, I also learned that the village's collective narrative has the potential to expand to encompass the stories and experiences of individuals from diverse faiths. This narrative evolution fosters an environment that celebrates the value of diverse religious identities, promoting understanding, harmony, and collaboration.

As I depart from Blimbingsari, I carry with me a deep appreciation for its remarkable progress and the warmth I experienced within its community. Blimbingsari's historical journey, marked by resilience, collaboration and peacemaking, sets the stage for a future that celebrates inclusivity. By embracing individuals from different religious backgrounds, Blimbingsari can cultivate an environment that nurtures interconnectedness and extends its sense of familial unity. This vision of inclusivity will enhance the village's collective identity and establish it as a model of religious moderation, fostering understanding, respect, and collaboration among people of diverse faiths.

Blimbingsari's transformative journey serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of a community. From overcoming adversity to embracing success, the village has demonstrated its capacity for change and progress. As it moves forward, Blimbingsari has the opportunity to open its doors to individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, extending its warmth and fostering an inclusive community, working towards a future where Blimbingsari shines as a beacon of unity, embracing diversity, and celebrating the richness of its residents' collective experiences.

Edward D. Simamora,
Indonesia

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Filling in the Empty Chairs

Crowded space. Single dish. Uncomfortable bed. Sweaty days. Sleepless nights. I knew for what to prepare myself. Yet, I was greeted by a whole different reality. Lonely, big spaces. Several unfinished dishes. Empty, comfortable beds. Fairly relaxing days. Solitary, restful nights. Then a question lingered in my mind, “What will my role be in this village?”

One memorable community immersion that I have been through back in the Philippines was when we were sent to a squatter area and live in one family’s house for a day. The houses barely had space from each other’s walls and they barely stood with strength. We were served with one dish, a can of sardines in tomato sauce with water spinach, for it was the only food available. There was barely no room for all of us as they were a family of 6 in that tiny, made-of-wood house. We did the dishes and played with their small kids in that small space. Somehow, this was the same picture I was expecting to see and experience in our 5-day community immersion here in Bali. But it was completely different.

Upon arriving at my host family’s house, I immediately felt a bit of disappointment as it was not the community I had imagined. While I was really mesmerized by the beauty and hugeness of the house, at the back of my mind, I thought that it would not really challenge me. We were offered a house separate from the owner’s, and individual rooms with en suite toilet and bath. Each room had a functioning fan and air conditioner. Surely, I thought to myself, my life for the duration of our stay in the village, will pretty much feel like a vacation – which proved to be correct with the few chores that I was able to perform.

However, moving away from what my stay looked like in the village, what really struck me most is the life of my host mom. On our first day, I immediately noticed the many photographs of her family displayed on the living room’s walls. I got excited because they are a family of five in the photos and I wanted to meet them all. However, the excitement was wiped off upon learning that she lives alone most of the time because her husband just passed away ten months ago. Her two children are staying in Surabaya, and her other child who lives in Denpasar comes home only on Sundays. I felt bad that she, at the age of 67, was living alone most of the time. Coming from a family whose members are always together, my sisters and I never want to leave our parents alone at home. It is just so difficult to leave them even just for a couple of days. However, of course, it is very understandable that her children are building a family of their own and are achieving their dreams. It is just sad to see my host mom taking care of two huge houses that are empty most of the time, preparing plenty of dishes with no one to feed, and maintaining the comfortable beds that no one gets to use. I saw how she appreciated our presence especially on the day we left when she said, “Lonely again. No friends again.” It was very painful to hear. I hope she does not have to feel that way. I also hope my mommy in the Philippines will never feel that way in the future.

The immersion served as a wake-up call to me to make more time with my family. Our parents would often tell us that they are happy watching us achieve our dreams, but they hide the fact that they are also longing for our presence. While my host mom is living a somehow comfortable life, surely, she’s also missing having the house crowded with her loved ones. As I am writing this, I know she is eating dinner by herself, as usual. Hence, even for just 5 nights and 4 days that I was able to fill in the empty chairs at the dining table and made her extra happy, I can say that my stay in Blimbingsari was fruitful after all. I have found out and fulfilled my role.

*Ma. Jacintha L. De Leon,
Philippines*





Best Friends We Long to Have

They enjoy playing under the sun. Your shoes are their favorite. They run a lot. They sleep a lot. The sound of chips wakes them up. They will be waiting behind the door for you. Oh, they're extremely possessive too! And lives in your house rent-free. Do you know who they are? Yep! The best furry friends - cats and dogs.

Dogs have long been known to be the "human's best friend". And they deserve to be. But the distinction of being the "best friend" is not only limited to dogs, but is given to cats by their owners as well! However, this bestfriend relationship can only be understood by dog and cat owners. People who don't have pets would always question, "Why do you treat your pets so special? Why do you love your cats or dogs so much?"

Well, having a pet, a cat or a dog, is truly not that easy. You have additional bills to pay. You have to spend money for their food, for their vaccines, and for their check-up. They could also ruin your pretty couches and even pee and poo on areas and things you like. They can be too loud at times and too wild for your patience. You have to frequently bathe them and walk them out. And you'll not be safe from their painful scratches too. But, all these expenses and slight inconveniences won't compare to the beautiful things they make you feel.

Going home tired from school and work? You have a jumping dog and meowing cat waiting for you by the door. You're bored? You have furry friends to play with and run with. You're alone at the dining table? You have cute little company to eat beside you. You have to stay up late at night? You have furry balls curled in your lap through the night. You feel mad at the world? You have a set of ears ready to listen without judgment. You feel like crying in your room? Cry it out. You have a buddy to hug and who will stay with you till you feel better.

As human beings, we all crave for someone who will always be there, who will always choose us, who waits patiently, who listens without judgment, who delights in our presence, who will cheer us up whenever we're down, and who makes us feel like we are their whole world. And for fur parents, they surely have found this someone in the form of their cats and dogs.

Isn't it also beautiful how these small, cute, four-legged creatures teach us a lot on how to be better persons? And even better peacebuilders? They teach us the value of loyalty, of play, of service, of patience, and of unconditional love. Dogs and cats can not talk but have proved themselves to be the best comforters. It teaches us that sometimes, we don't necessarily need to say something to make our loved ones feel better. Oftentimes, we just need to let them feel our presence. That they can share without fear of judgment. That we're beside them in all that they do.

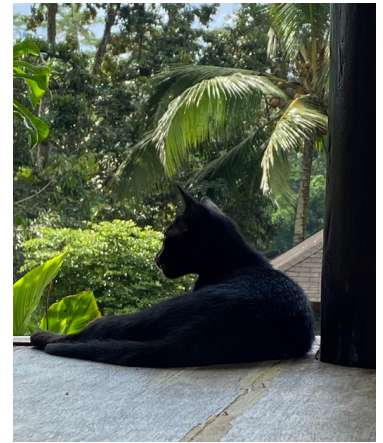
People who want to work for peace, should learn a bit from cats and dogs. That sometimes, doing less is actually more. Especially today where there's an increasing number of people suffering from mental health challenges, the role of a family, of friends, a best friend, or even a stranger in providing companionship the way cats and dogs do is very important. A safe space where troubled souls can vent out, can cry, can release all the pain without any judgments and even without any words received from the ears listening is what we oftentimes need.





Truly, cats and dogs may cause a little trouble in your home every now and then being the playful creatures they are, but at the end of the day, these are also something that you learned to accept and love. The slight inconvenience is incomparable to the love they give and the role they play in our lives. Hence, it is no wonder why fur parents treat their cats and dogs so special, why they love them so dearly. They undoubtedly are the purest-hearted, kindest-souled best friends we all long to have.

*Ma. Jacintha L. De Leon,
Philippines*



Bali, Indonesia - The friends we made. ©ICF.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Nota Bene:

Following the World Café method, the participants in three small groups, discussed their definitions, types, levels, causes and common approaches to conflict. The facilitator asked the three groups to write two stanzas each to summarize and express their insights. The collated poem below is the output of the Collaborative Poetry Writing process presented during the World Café Harvest.

- - Muriel Orevillo Montenegro, facilitator

I

In a world where passions clashes,
Struggling for hopes in the midst of rain fire;
There clashes different values and beliefs,
Carrying immerse power, both light and dark.

Cruelty has defeated the greatest souls,
Kings, Kingdoms and Nations;
Dividing tribes, religions and peoples,
Marching into the darkest corners of human souls.





II

Causes of conflict left and right
Endless situations streaming in sight.
Culture, religion, perspective is different,
Can we really call each country excellent?

Lack of compromise, empathy and communication;
Peace seems distant in this smart phone generations.
Misinterpretation, miscommunication, misunderstanding,
So many misses in life!

III

There are some ways to solve conflicts.
Even if they're big or small,
Find root cause, first of all;
Then try to get each other's points.

When these thoughts are clear enough,
Take turns to negotiate,
No one is left behind;
Keep in mind to be kind and wise.



By

The Participants

School of Peace 2023 – Bali, Indonesia





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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: Gender Justice – ICF lauds Nepal Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage

June is Pride Month. It is the month to celebrate the victories gained during decades of the LGBTQIA++ struggle for equal rights. One of these significant gains happened on June 28, 2023. On this day, the Supreme Court of Nepal gave the LGBTQIA++ the gift of a landmark ruling that allows same-sex marriage. Nepal's existing Civil Code still defines marriage as a transaction between a male and female only. However, the Supreme Court Justice urged the government to begin accepting same-sex marriage registrants, even as its legislative body prepares to formulate a law on marriage that includes same-sex marriage. This makes Nepal the second country in Asia that upholds the rights of the diverse LGBTQIA++ to marry the person they love, albeit the person belongs to the same sex. The first country that makes same-sex marriage legal was Taiwan, when the Constitutional Court came out with a ruling on May 24, 2019. The enactment of the law on the ruling followed.

Other Asian countries are lagging. The LGBTQIA++ activists and their supporters have organized groups to lobby for their respective governments to enact a law that upholds and respects their human rights as outlined in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, the governments of these Asian countries are snail-paced in responding to the clamor for laws that protect the rights of LGBTQIA++ people.

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In Japan, a district court ruling wavers when it said that it is constitutional to ban same-sex marriage but expressed “concerns about the dignity and human rights of same-sex couples.” Yet, another Japanese district court says it is unconstitutional to ban same-sex marriage. Among the Group of Seven, Japan is the only country that does not provide legal protection for same-sex unions even as a poll shows 70% of its population supports it.

In Bangladesh, the activists, human rights groups, and defenders of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), are wary of the “possible restrictions that the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016 might impose on civil society organizations.” They claim that this Act makes their work difficult because it may expose the diverse SOGIESC to public threats, considering that there had already been threats and even killings of activists.

In the Philippines, the courts hanged the rainbow flag as a show of solidarity and recognize the diverse LGBTQIA++ in its ranks. Yet, the legislative body is adamant to vote on the proposed Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, or Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) bill that the House Committee on Women and gender equality after the panel accepted the substitute bill crafted by the technical working group (TWG). The SOGIESC proposal has been forwarded several times in almost ten years now.

In Indonesia, there is a practice of “curing” therapy of LGBTQIA++ to go back to heteronormativity and cisgender norms. During a raid of an LGBTQIA++ hangout, an ustadz said to a Muslim gay person: “There was no bencong in our ancestors, bencong is the devil.” Bencong, pronounced benchong, is a Bahasa word that refers to anyone who is LGBTQIA++. In Asia, there are Christian churches and pious groups that consider the LGBTQIA++ as “sinners” and are bound to hell because of being such.

Why is it difficult for people to accept people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)? How do religion and faith make believers turn their gaze away from fellow human beings and deprive them of their right to be simply because of their sexuality and gender? Why does a religion that teaches about love looks at love between two people of the same sex a problem? Christians, for example, would invoke the teachings of the Bible without understanding this text considered as sacred, came to them wrapped in the culture of the Mediterranean people in ancient times. Instead of focusing the Bible’s teachings on justice and love, believers become bigots and self-righteous. How can true believers of a loving God liberate their religions from their captivity to the patriarchal norms that prop up homophobia? Is it possible that homophobia can be a symptom of one's fear of his or her tendencies to be one, when they are in the presence of those who freely claim and perform their gender outside of the heteronormative box?

If Nepal is able to uphold the rights of the LGBTQIA++, there is no reason why other Asian countries could not do it. ICF lauds the Nepali court’s ruling. ICF stands on the principle that justice is a requisite for the realization of genuine and lasting peace. The issues affecting the people of diverse SOGIESC encompasses cultural, social, political, and economic aspects of the day-to-day peaceful living. Thus, ICF takes this matter seriously as a peace issue. Every step is part of the equipping of young people in Asia to contribute to the peacebuilding efforts in their respective areas. ICF, therefore, calls every peace-loving human being to think about this matter by putting one's self in the place of the LGBTQIA++ persons who struggle for respect and acceptance as human beings.

