

Adenauer Young Researcher's Report

# Weathering Climate Risks towards Positive Peace in Post-Conflict BARMM

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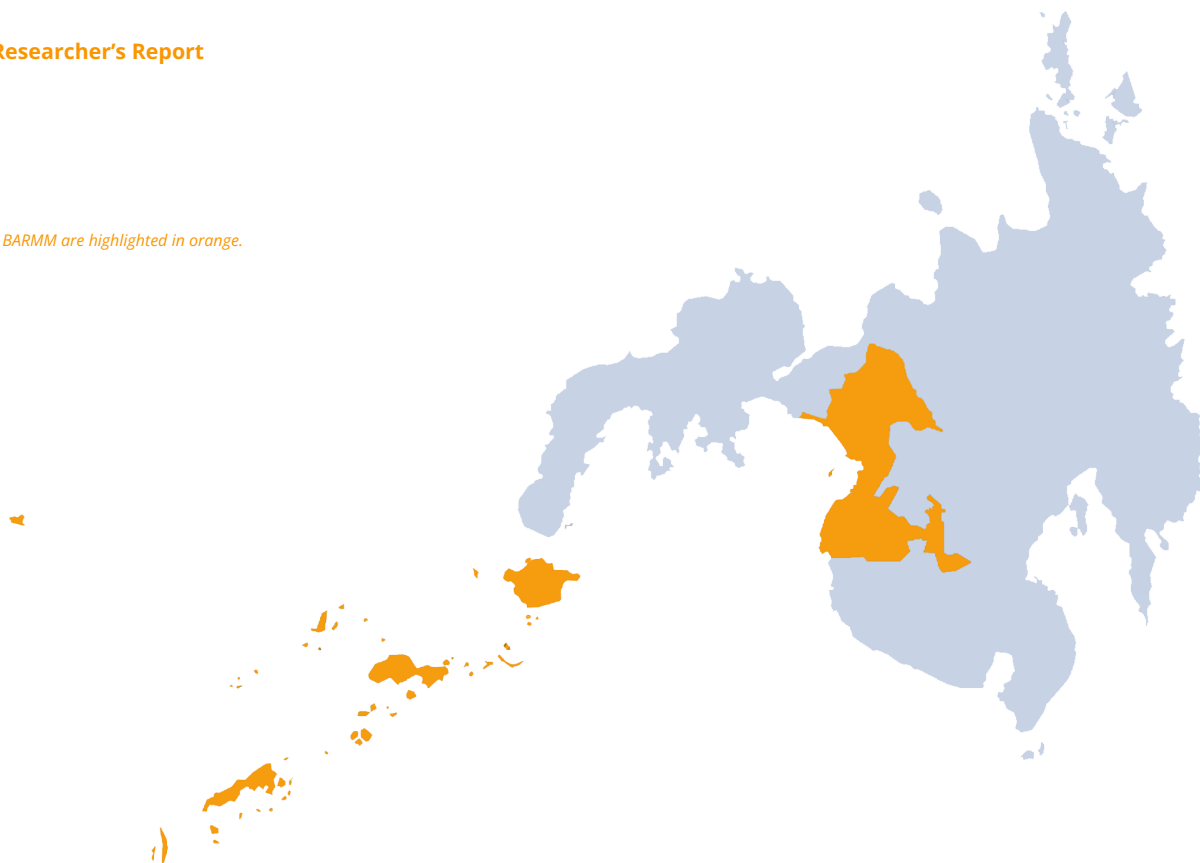
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Map of BARMM  
Provinces under BARMM are highlighted in orange.



## Weathering Climate Risks towards Positive Peace in Post-Conflict BARMM

Kuhlyn M. Salazar

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In July 2018, the Philippine government signed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) to establish the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).<sup>1</sup> This landmark legislation sets the foundation for the interim government, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), to work towards the region's conflict transformation. Beyond the cessation of direct violence, the BTA is challenged to foster positive peace or the "attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies."<sup>2</sup> This includes the region working to transform its perceived "culture of violence" into a "culture of peace" through the genuine inclusion of its diverse ethnolinguistic constituency in the region's institutional building. Such actions become powerful tools in the face of contemporary forces that complicate the region's transformation, such as climate change.

While data on the causal link between climate change and violent conflict remains inconclusive, climate change is expected to destabilize societies as it interacts with other social, political, and economic stressors. In this sense, climate change does not impact social systems and social cohesion by itself. Instead, it is considered an ultimate threat multiplier that may aggravate existing grievances and foster conditions ripe for exploitation by conflicting forces.<sup>3</sup> Professors Jon Barnett and W. Neil Adger further this notion by saying that climate change undermines human security by decreasing individuals' access to and quality of natural resources necessary for survival.<sup>4</sup> As conflict is often associated with access and entitlements over natural resources, disruptions in these entitlements could trigger civil unrest. In BARMM's case, other than resource conflict, much of the sources of grievances also come from overlapping land claims, partly resulting in the protracted community wars among its different sectors, particularly between Moros and Non-Moro Indigenous People (NMIP).

Several socio-political realities render BARMM sensitive to risks associated with climate change and violent conflict.

First, BARMM is mainly dependent on agriculture and fishing. Both industries deal with natural resources that are highly sensitive to climate variability, endangering these livelihoods in the face of unprecedented global temperature and sea-level rise.<sup>5</sup>

Second, while the country's poverty incidence has significantly decreased from 18.0% in 2021 to 16.4% in 2023, BARMM remains the poorest region in the country with a total poverty incidence of 34.8%.<sup>6</sup>

Third, the persistence of local armed conflict can compound the risks of climate-related hazards. While vertical conflict among national government forces and Moro separatist groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have primarily ceased, horizontal conflict among communal groupings remains to threaten the stability of peace in the region. These hostilities take root from BARMM's long history of socio-political conflict, often associated with clan feuds called *rido*. Other local wars involve the region's diverse ethnolinguistic groups, particularly between Moros and NMIPs.

Finally, BARMM's nascent institutions could open pathways to further climate vulnerability and trigger violence by potentially disrupting traditional ways of living.

The conditions resulting from these realities will only become increasingly difficult to manage as climate change grows more complex over time. When extreme weather events complicate these realities, they can create conditions that lead to further human insecurity. In situations of heightened human insecurity, individuals are more likely to engage in violent activities.<sup>7</sup> These elements combined create a feedback loop that perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty, deepening and widening multidimensional forms of exclusion.

Therefore, if positive peace refers to the sustainability of peace, then it is necessary to reflect the intersecting impacts of climate change in the BARMM region's policy agenda. Without consideration of these points, peace will remain fragile.

### Climate and conflict nexus in BARMM

The intersection of climate and conflict risks creates conditions that contribute to further human insecurity, such as 1) resource scarcity, 2) mass displacement, and 3) institutional incapacity. These may undermine people's access to essential resources and services, the protection of their rights and livelihoods, and their ability to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

#### Resource scarcity

Resource scarcity is one of the top risks associated with conflict, as it exacerbates competition and can promote mass displacement. Unfortunately, climate change will only worsen the factors that contribute to resource scarcity in the BARMM region, such as sea-level rise, flooding, and droughts.

A report published by Climate Tracker Asia shows that the Philippines is experiencing sea-level rise three to four times faster than the global average.<sup>9</sup> The same report also identifies Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Cotabato City as future sinking localities. Not only would sea-level rise cause livelihood contractions for those relying on coastal resources, but it could also lead to mass displacement as islands become at risk of chronic and permanent inundation.

Flooding has also consistently threatened the livelihood of those living in the Ligawasan Marsh, especially in the Cotabato River Basin, where flooding has led to the inundation of farmlands. According to research by Delina et al. in 2023, the inundation of farmlands has also prevented farmers from recouping land, seeds, agricultural equipment, and livestock investments. Consequently, the researchers say that this has made it



more challenging for farmers to meet their debt obligations, which could then trigger further tension among community members.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, droughts have persisted in the region with increasing impacts in the past few decades. The BARMM's experience with extreme drought has led to unrest and, eventually, violence. In 2016, prolonged drought conditions in North Cotabato led 6,000 farmers and indigenous people to occupy the Cotabato-Davao Highway, demanding provisions of rice and calamity funds to cushion the impact of the growing famine in the area.<sup>11</sup> In the ensuing chaos, the police opened fire, immediately killing two farmers and wounding dozens more.<sup>12</sup> The possible manifestation of this conflict in the future as heat conditions worsen could serve as a pathway for different interest groups to undermine the legitimacy of BARMM's fledgling government.

### Mass displacement

Displacement in Mindanao is attributable to both existing local conflict and natural disasters. Table 1 shows a brief view of the region's experience of displacement due to extreme weather events in the past few years. The list is not exhaustive but can provide an idea of severe instances of displacement that can impact order and stability.

Table 1. Extreme weather events and displacement in Mindanao.

Extreme Weather Event, Year	Affected Areas in Mindanao	Approximate # of Displaced Individuals
Typhoon Vinta, 2017	Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, ARMM, Region X, Region IX, Region XI	767,994 <sup>13</sup>
Typhoon Marilyn, 2019	Bongao, Tawi-Tawi	760 <sup>14</sup>
Typhoon Ofel, 2020	Datu Salibo, Maguindanao	33,560 <sup>15</sup>
Typhoon Paeng, October 2022	Datu Odin Sinsuat, Datu Blah Sinsuat, Upi, South Upi, Maguindanao del Norte, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi	557,000 <sup>16</sup>
Low Pressure Area, September 2023	Maguindanao del Norte	30,000 <sup>17</sup>

In particular, it should be noted that due to the region's significant poverty incidence, the resources and absorptive capacity of the neighboring communities where displaced BARMM locals may migrate are most likely also limited and strained. Such instances may lead to heightened resource competition or even dangerous resettlements. A cyclical process emerges from these incidents, where conditions brought by the intersection of extreme weather events and socio-political tensions reinforce and magnify those same tensions.

Such an intersection is best illustrated in the events surrounding the Mt. Minandar landslide in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao, chronicled by Rappler's investigative team. In October 2022, Typhoon Paeng triggered a landslide in Mt. Minandar, burying 27 members of a Teduray<sup>18</sup> community, primarily children, who were displaced to the foothills of the mountain. Previously, the Teduray resided in the Kusiong shorelines, their ancestral domain, until they were deprived of legal rights and forced to abandon the area to accommodate a coastal project. Today, the Teduray survivors remain displaced.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, private resorts continue operating on the Kusiong shorelines, with one of the resorts reportedly owned by a Maguindanaoan political clan member.<sup>20</sup>

### **Institutional incapacity**

Research also shows that climate change may impact the capacity of institutions to deliver goods and services by increasing the costs of providing public infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, and in the case of the Philippines, poor governance resulting in policy failures and low institutional capacity figures into climate vulnerability and could arguably be a more significant element rather than geographic and natural conditions themselves.



Consider the fact that BARMM's governing institutions are still in their nascent stages and in the process of building their institutional strength to carry out complex processes that will ensure inclusive peace. For example, the BTA has not yet established its climate change commission. Without it, there is no general body to monitor and evaluate the programs and action plans for adapting and mitigating the impact of climate change that are particular to BARMM. The BTA is also yet to complete its foundational legislation, with a notable absence of its own Indigenous Peoples Code as of writing.

Some BARMM local institutions also practice maladaptive policies that only result in further vulnerability. For example, in the same research by Delina et al., Cotabato City residents suggested constructing more canals to divert water flow when island formation of silted soil started to appear at the same level as roadways. However, the local government opted to elevate the roadways by dumping more concrete. This case is an example of a quick fix that local governments are often guilty of resorting to. Delina et al. call this failure a result of a "concrete colonialism" mindset, where cement and concrete are used as indicators for progress and development.<sup>22</sup>

Another observation is that municipal-level Local Climate Change Action Plans (LCCAPs) are often duplicates of one another.<sup>23</sup> These LCCAPs are meant to be context-based so that the municipalities can properly coordinate adaptation and mitigation mechanisms. Although this is not specific to the BARMM, duplicated LCCAPs could manifest as misinformed adaptation projects and misaligned hazard mapping that could be disastrous for families living in disaster and conflict risk areas. The previous example of the Mt. Minandar landslide illustrates a similar point. Until now, government-led hazard mapping in the area remains outdated, with the HazardHunterPH still in the process of "updating" – two years after Typhoon Paeng.<sup>24</sup> According to Rappler, only the University of the Philippines Resilience Institute's Nationwide Operational Assessment of Hazards (UP NOAH) tagged the area as highly vulnerable to landslides before the incident.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, a group of researchers in 2022 pointed out that conflict transformations tend to follow a liberal peace agenda.<sup>26</sup> These usually manifest in the promotion of privatization and market liberalization. The BOL also appears to emphasize extractive projects like mining, as seen in Article XIII under Natural Resources. A 2021 report on the Ligawasan Marsh states that the wetland remained relatively untouched despite hosting rich oil reserves because of the protracted conflict among Moro separatist groups and national government forces in the region.<sup>27</sup> However, talks of extraction for economic development have proliferated among local and foreign investors following the peace agreement.<sup>28</sup> These talks may clash with what researcher Augusto Gatmaytan in 2017 describes as the "mosaic of individual and family claims" in the marsh, some of which are untitled.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the government must ensure that these economic opportunities do not come at the expense of a healthy ecology and a just distribution of resources.

### **Pursuing Positive Peace in BARMM**

The previous section illustrated how climate change threatens peace and stability, especially in the BARMM. Therefore, climate change must be part of the BARMM government's consideration and policy agenda in moving forward in its conflict transformation. However, for this opportunity to manifest at the policy level, the following recommendations are outlined:



- 1) addressing data disenfranchisement,
- 2) strengthening inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue, and
- 3) effective political participation of sectors.

### **Addressing data disenfranchisement**

Despite the prevalence of extreme weather events in the BARMM, there is still limited data on climate change vulnerabilities.<sup>30</sup> Existing data focus more on disaster risk management and environmental mapping, which come in contact with but are separate from climate risks. Members of the BTA have already proposed the creation of a regional climate change commission which can hopefully respond to this knowledge gap by accelerating the collection of community-based assessments and the efforts to bridge gaps in the region's understanding of climate risks. Furthermore, there needs to be both long-term and short-term mapping that can look at historical and contemporary patterns of climate and environmental change. These could only be comprehensive with the support of indigenous people, farmers, and fisherfolk whose livelihoods and sustenance are closely linked to the environment. Women are also important knowledge resources due to their disproportionate experience of these compounding impacts.

The data discrepancy in the hazard mapping between government and academic institutions must also be addressed since these differences are confusing and possibly fatal, as in the case of the Mt. Minandar landslide. Moreover, hazard mapping institutions must experiment with different mapping methods, such as Probabilistic Risk Assessment, which looks into the effects of stressors on the environment and worst-case scenarios.<sup>31</sup> Experts and authorities must also investigate these data discrepancies and determine possible political and economic motivations.

### **Strengthening inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue**

Religion and culture are primarily addressed within the discussion of violence and cultural conflict in BARMM. However, these religions and cultures also have valuable information and practices that can contribute to climate mitigation and conflict resolution. Thus, greater efforts should be made toward inviting religious and cultural voices to the discussion of reconciliation, as well as to climate adaptation and mitigation. Moreover, it is crucial that such initiatives are carried out in a language that is easily understood and appreciated by the affected communities. Through this approach, they can contribute valuable insights from their lived experiences and existing knowledge systems, which can then inform the development of projects and policies on climate change.

Local governments can also take advantage of the growing initiatives for sustainability and peace rooted in indigenous practices across the region and Mindanao. For example, the Teduray's *sulagad* is an agroecology system where diverse crops are cultivated, both temporary and permanent, between healthy spaces in their planting calendar.<sup>32</sup> This allows the soil to regenerate and ensures soil fertility and strength. In addition, the Umayamnon tribe from the neighboring municipality in Bukidnon has been encouraging cultivation shifts to bamboo and cocoa.<sup>33</sup> These crops are resilient to climate impacts and have significant carbon sequestration capacity. The local government can support these initiatives by providing them with the resources they need and assessing if these strategies do not negatively impact the biodiversity of the locality.

In terms of conflict resolution, the local government could support existing mediation and conflict transformation practices of its indigenous communities. Horizontal conflict can only be truly resolved between the involved parties due to the complex and cultural differences in how they respond to issues. For example, a community of Tausug mediators collectively called *Tumikang Sama Sama* (TSS) have been addressing issues of *rido* in Sulu using a mix of legal mechanisms and traditional cultural practices.<sup>34</sup> So far, they have taken 82 *rido* cases and 48 have been formally settled. In the neighboring Zamboanga del Norte, the *Titik* have their own conflict transformation process which saw the reconciliation of two indigenous leaders who had conflict over mining concessions in their communities.<sup>35</sup> These knowledge and skills can

support IP leaders in asserting and demanding that their rights be reflected and enforced in legal and formal agreements wherein they manage to engage the government and other stakeholders.<sup>36</sup> The decrease in local conflict can significantly decrease the compounding impact of climate hazards as discussed earlier, particularly on displacement.

### ***Effective political participation across sectors***

The pressing question for the upcoming 2025 elections is whether or not the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), the MILF's main party, will win its desired majority seats in the parliament. Questions also arise on what happens if traditional political families end up dominating the parliamentary elections. Both situations raise concern for BARMM's 13 ethnolinguistic groups whose interests and freedoms might be on the line. Championing climate perspectives in conflict transformation would require the voices of those who are directly impacted by this and are often from marginalized groups such as IPs, IDPs, women, and youth. Notwithstanding their vulnerabilities, these groups also exhibit agency in forwarding sustainable peace and development. Women leaders like MP Froilyn Mendoza, representative of the Teduray indigenous group, and MP Raissa Jajurie, a Moro Filipino lawyer and human rights activist, are only two of the many women across ethnolinguistic groups that are actively lobbying for structural change in the region.

Furthermore, the region's civil society must be empowered to participate in the political sphere by building credible political parties.<sup>37</sup> Participation can give marginalized groups more opportunities to ensure their interests are reflected in the BARMM parliament's policy agenda. Despite the valid fears over uncertainties, the current setup of the BARMM parliament opens pathways for programmatic politics. While its diversity is often cited as the root of inevitable conflict, it can also be seen as an opportunity for comprehensive institution-building and sustainable governance.

Civil society organizations and international partners must also continue to support society at large in actively engaging in politics through legislative training and leadership empowerment. An example of this project was the Democratic Leadership and Active Civil Society Empowerment (DELACSE) in Bangsamoro, a European Union-funded project hosted by the Institute for Autonomy and Governance (IAG) and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Philippines in 2019. Its main objectives focus on training and empowerment of local leaders, especially towards the creation of articulating comprehensive policies.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

With the 2025 elections fast approaching, the predominant issues in the BARMM revolve around electoral campaigns and electoral education. While these have important implications for the region's future, the less visible challenges must not be set aside. The sustainability of peace largely depends on the regional government's ability to enact forward-looking policies. Positive peace is inherently forward-looking, accounting for the security and sufficiency of the future. Thus, contemporary forces like climate change must be addressed together with the region's pressing concerns. Moreover, women, the youth, and indigenous people are often disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. Thus, forwarding a climate-sensitive conflict transformation opens entry points to the cooperation of the region's diverse people. This provides an opportunity for the region to transform the perception of its diversity from cultures of violence to cultures of peace. The effective political participation of its civil society in institutional building is important to ensure that the future is accounted for in the region's transformation, not just present growth. Strengthening institutional capacity through programmatic solutions is the ultimate shield from climate and conflict risks for the BARMM, and such cannot be achieved without the genuine participation of its ethnolinguistic mosaic.



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## The Author

**Kuhlyn M. Salazar** was an intern at KAS Philippines from January to April 2024. She graduated from Ateneo de Manila University in June 2024 with a degree in Diplomacy and International Relations. Her research interests include climate justice, international human rights law, and security and peacebuilding.

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