



Breaking barriers
Building
BRIDGES

to  ERFAITH ACTION on

domestic violence
teenage pregnancy
maternal and child mortality
HIV & AIDS
disasters and emergencies

July 2010

Philippine Center for Population and Development, Inc.

or PCPD, is a private, grant-making entity which believes that a better understanding of the relationship between population and development will empower Filipino families to achieve an improved quality of life through informed decisions and actions. The Center supports research, advocacy and model projects on population and development in the Philippines.

This monograph is part of the Center's continuing effort in research utilization.



FBOs should build on common areas where there is agreement while respecting their differences, and respond to the call of their faith in the service of the people.

Rev. Bishop Rodrigo D. Tano
Keynote Address
*Building an Interfaith Network
on Population and Development
in the Philippines*
April 2, 2009.

Introduction

There is no question that Faith-based Organizations in the Philippines or FBOs have had good success in reaching a wide spectrum of Filipinos including the poorest and those in far-flung areas of the archipelago. But their full potential as development and cultural agents of change remains untapped.

Tapping this potential in addressing population and development concerns particularly maternal mortality, HIV & AIDS, gender-based violence and humanitarian crises, was the pivot around which ideas were exchanged during the conference, *Building an Interfaith Network on Population and Development in the Philippines* last April 2 and 3, 2009.

Forty-nine (49) FBOs and other development agencies answered the call of the Philippine Center for Population and Development (PCPD) which hosted the conference at

2 the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) with support from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

This essay reflects on the dynamics and lessons from the conference, with the aim of bringing to light some steps that can be taken to propel FBOs as significant players in the area of population and development. It was triggered by the critical but constructive and open exchange of views at the conference as well as by current thinking and literature about paradigms relevant to the issues, the shifts that have been made, and those that need to be made.

Hopefully, this monograph will help pinpoint problem areas in interfaith collaboration as basis for exploring possible solutions. FBOs in the Philippines are mostly Christian, some Muslim and of indigenous groups such as Manobo, T'boli, Mandaya.

Christian FBOs are predominantly Catholic, followed by Protestant and Evangelical FBOs. This conglomerate reaches about nine of every ten (or 90%) Filipinos. Islamic FBOs on the other hand reach about 8% to 9%.

Clearly, FBOs have a unique and great potential to respond significantly to the most controversial and sensitive issues of our times. They can help stop teen pregnancies — hopefully lessen the number of Filipino girls aged 15 to 19 who have unwanted pregnancies — currently 13 for every hundred. They can also help bring down the incidence of Filipino women dying at childbirth — currently 230 of 100,000 women. They can also help arrest the spread of HIV & AIDS among Filipinos — current figure of Filipinos infected with the HIV virus and/or with AIDS is 8,000 (Businessworld, March 12-13, 2010).

They can also help address problems related to internal displacement arising from armed conflict — as of July 2009, an estimated 200,000 in Central Mindanao are reportedly affected.

Conference participants were of the consensus that FBOs, as individual entities and as a group, need to craft a programmatic response to these issues. The call is for FBOs to reflect on the projected 142 million Filipinos by 2014, the impact of such number on the environment and the country's resources, and what can be done to better ensure the welfare of the 142 million Filipinos expected barely four years from now.

The big question at the conference was how to nurture a faith-based fellowship and sustain a genuine interfaith dialogue that will arrive at the appropriate response to gender relations, the right to sexual and reproductive health, and related issues.

**What are some of the barriers
to interfaith collaboration?
And what are the building blocks
that will transform such a collaboration
into a genuine force
in the population and development arena?**

Language, Symbols, and Paradigms

Language

The power of language cannot be underestimated. It can break as well as build.

If FBOs are determined to really make a difference, they must recognize the overriding role of language. But more than that, they must attempt to break it as a barrier.

Language evokes meanings, significance, and values that are cultural. Words and inflections convey meanings intellectually and emotionally. Words illuminate thoughts. They trigger emotions and, when assumptions are shared, clarify ideas. Words can make us cry or laugh when their meanings and references are understood and shared.

"HIV & AIDS is caused by sin, is sinful and those who have it are sinners."

Conference participant (Small group discussion)

This snippet shows the power of language — how it can evoke feelings of outrage, if one disagrees, or pleasure, if one agrees. In it, "sin" and "sinner" signify judgments on persons with HIV & AIDS. Such judgment and the concomitant labeling can stem from the speaker's associating the disease or the condition with promiscuity (or having multiple partners) or with homosexuality.

The statement underscores the power of language in shaping mindsets as well as the power of mindsets to influence language. To wit, some people continue to link the disease or the condition with promiscuity or homosexuality in spite of it being generally known that HIV & AIDS can be acquired through non-sexual means.

Symbols

Religious symbols are part of scripture and religious rites, and therefore enduring. They trigger emotional response to one's faith and consequently elicit personal participation in it. Like language, symbols evoke emotions from those who share meanings and references. They can however also elicit negative feelings or give rise to misconceptions on the part of those who believe differently.

Most people have ready-made assumptions about religious symbols as they do language. Christian religious symbols may evoke anger from people who associate Christianity with oppressive practices such as the disenfranchisement of others or taking over others' property. Islamic religious symbols may, on the other hand, be associated with terrorism or violence by those with little or no real understanding of the struggles of the Muslims.

Together, language, symbols and the stories we tell comprise our framework of meanings and give rise to multiple-layer paradigms.

Paradigms

Paradigms are assumptions, generalizations, and images that influence how we view the world and how we behave. They are our guiding rules that enable us to make good sense of

6 the tremendous amount of information constantly bombarding us. They are seldom stated explicitly and are transmitted subtly through culture and during interaction with others. They are often accepted as natural or correct and seldom questioned.

"Maybe prostitution can be addressed better when we look at it as a fact of life for the women and not as a form of exploitation?"

Conference participant

Behind this foregoing quotation is a paradigm that can best be explained by the speaker if he or she is aware of his or her own paradigm. Maybe women are attributed lesser status than men? Or their bodies considered as commodities?

Groups or organizations tend to share the same views, mindsets and assumptions. These help people make sense of what's happening around them and consequently guide their actions. Sometimes these mindsets are crystallized around constructs such as the Ten Commandments in the case of Catholics and the Fatwas in the case of Muslims.

But these constructs are limited only to what they highlight. For example, in all faiths, the love of husband for wife is valued, encouraged, and mandated. Thus one would expect that the opposite — not loving a spouse — is discouraged.

However, domestic violence is sometimes not culturally considered as "unloving" acts. And the mental construct of "love your spouse" takes a backseat when a husband hits his wife or forces sex on her. Some husbands as well as wives interpret *hitting* as a form of discipline and therefore a

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manifestation of love, which some refer to as *tough love*. Some spouses interpret it within the context of marriage vows that call for wives to submit to their husbands. Thus, domestic violence is rationalized within the intangible construct of “loving” one’s spouse.

That some people consider HIV & AIDS sinful can be attributed to a combination of their life experiences, and cultural beliefs and assumptions that equate HIV & AIDS with sin.

Islam and Christianity share common themes, among which is the separation of body and soul. For both faiths, the soul being eternal is more important and the body which is temporal is subjugated to it.

Thus matters related to each are similarly considered — things of the body are regarded as less important than those of the soul. This dichotomy is sometimes carried over to matters of reproductive health, among others.

When looking at the conflict in Mindanao, the paradigm operating for most people focuses only on the armed conflict between the insurgents and the military. Somehow the more common, pervasive and impactful clan feuds (*tridos*) are not recognized as *conflict* in this prevailing paradigm.

This shows how paradigms can limit visual periphery even if they do provide some form of order and harmony. And because the prevailing paradigm defines the questions that may be asked, the explanations that can be sought, and the solutions that are acceptable, it directs the way institutions and organizations respond — from funding for programs to the delivery of programs.

8 Paradigms are not easy to change.

For one, they promote cohesion within a group or a community. Dilemmas, dichotomies, anomalies, and new evidence that point to the weakness of the paradigm are also not readily acknowledged. Over time however, paradigms become limited because they cease to be consistent with reality. It is only when the whole community consciously makes the collective decision to shift their paradigms (also referred to as *conversion*) that change happens.

Systems, structures, and practices

Organizations are composed of people united by certain mindsets, paradigms, and language that are manifested in structures, policies, and practices. In time, these external manifestations of structures, policies, and practices take on a life of their own and begin to influence or dictate the behaviors and responses of people.

People must examine mindsets and paradigms including the manifestations of old paradigms. We must be ready to modify or create new elements in keeping with reality and to be consistent with what our respective faiths dictate. We must also look into the various aspects of our organizations against present-day realities, such as our curriculum for religious leaders, our strategic program addressing immediate and emerging social issues, and the scriptures (the Holy Qur'an or the Bible).

Shifting paradigms

By delving into unquestioned, unexamined, or even unconscious assumptions and mindsets, we are able to adjust our paradigms to make them appropriate to our prevailing

reality. It is therefore important for us to continually challenge our perceptions of the world, and examine our language and our assumptions. Personally and organizationally, we need to deal with ideas that are contrary to or which threaten our current views so that we can acquire a broader perspective.

We need to closely study our assumptions about sensitive issues like sexuality, gender relations, and/or the right to sexual and reproductive health in the light of new data and within the dictates of our faith.

“A person like you can reach more whose minds might be closed but opened, because they, however, listened and engaged with you.”

Note of a conference participant
to an HIV-positive speaker

**Following are some ways by which
we as individuals and our organizations
can shift paradigms, break barriers,
and promote interfaith collaboration.**

10 **Make faith real.**

During the conference, the participants' face-to-face encounter with people who are HIV-positive and with young female ex-prostitutes who were undergoing rehabilitation and therapy, served as a platform for practicing one's faith. Often our assumptions and prejudices are unfounded, and a simple face-to-face interaction is enough to dispel doubt and/or promote empathy. Direct knowledge and empathy enable us to make relevant and appropriate responses to situations rather than simply react to them. Such responses are what make our faith consistent and grounded in reality.

Practice of one's faith within the context of current realities is key. Making one's faith real also means looking deeper into our current paradigms. This will not only enable us to manifest our faith in the way we deal with people and things but to really see what is often and usually obscure. For instance, some of us gloss over the real value of the roles women play in various social, political, economic and cultural activities. Women are not generally recognized as community leaders because leadership is traditionally ascribed to men. Muslim women's inputs in resolving clan feuds are often ignored.

Other roles and inputs of women in confronting contemporary issues must be determined, recognized and supported. This will bring women into the mainstream of efforts to minimize domestic violence, teenage pregnancies, HIV & AIDS, and other similar maladies afflicting Philippine society today.

Forge new relationships.

Establishing new relationships within one's organization is important. Encouraging dialogue and providing venues for such exchanges can help organizations in grappling internally with core present-day social issues such as sexual and reproductive rights.

Cultivating relationships with other organizations is also crucial. It enables an organization to keep in touch with the

environment with which it must be relevant and responsive. Relationships with other FBOs, other popdev-focused NGOs, organizations dealing with sexual and reproductive health, victims of gender-based violence, those living with HIV & AIDS, and other sectors of society — can significantly enhance an organization's perspective.

Face to face interaction helps in clarifying personal as well as organizational views and surfacing the paradigms that are at work. Others' experiences help us in assessing our own course of action.

Learn to deal with aberrations, discordant views, and dilemmas.

Provide ways and avenues by which people can learn, such as interactive processes and opportunities where they can converse with those who think or believe differently, or where negative but constructive feedback can be solicited and shared.

As one conference participant stated (below), these encounters may come with some discomfort — both to others as well as to one's self. But they are necessary if we are to examine the paradigms we subscribe to within the context of other people's realities.

"...experience discomfort and bravely and humbly come to terms with it, and as a result, be changed by it. There can be no real compassion and empathy without dying to self."

A conference participant's reflection

Develop a new research tradition.

One way of equipping FBOs for dialogues that will generate creative energies and help them acquire a better understanding of the issues is through the development of a new research tradition.

12 This requires skills for candid and thorough investigation of population and development issues. It also requires more inputs with an FBO perspective. There must also be a unified commitment to further explore concepts, theories and possibilities in enabling FBOs deal with population issues and how different faiths can grow in the process.

To understand Islam and Christianity in light of current social realities, there is also a need to undertake a conscientious study of basic religious texts and sources, mainly prevailing interpretations of biblical and Qur'anic texts. This quotation tells us why.

“Biblical passages that deal with violence against women are not part of liturgical readings, e.g. Genesis 34 and Judges 19, and are not well understood in their context.”

Small group discussion

An Islamic scholar also points to the male-dominated interpretation of Islam, rather than to Islam per se, as what hinders the empowerment of Muslim women. Moreover, the vocal objection to male dominance by some of Prophet Muhammad's wives or their participation in producing narrations from the deeds and words of the Prophet (*hadiths*) are hardly known (Majid, 1998).

From both Christian and Islamic faiths, more and more theologians, scholars and researchers are taking a deeper look into religious traditions, assumptions, and practices. We need to do our part in this effort.

Develop a gender-sensitive and inclusive language, i.e., one that is capable of appropriately communicating faith-related matters within the context of contemporary life.

A new paradigm needs a new language that can meld faith with culture and society. It also needs a new set of stories that

will help believers formulate responses to moral and social issues and dilemmas as well as express these accurately and clearly. **13**

To celebrate the significance and difference of genders, liturgy and conferences must use Inclusive language.

Paraphrased from small group discussion

As different faiths come together to jointly conceptualize and formulate faith-based responses to the issues of population and development, one of the challenges is to come up with an inclusive, gender-sensitive, and culturally appropriate language. How should certain concepts be stated in order to accurately convey meanings in ways that these can be easily understood and appreciated?

Another challenge is to make the language capable of describing the new interrelationships among the different faiths and promoting understanding among them. How does the word *collaboration* resonate with FBOs reaching out to other FBOs? Are there other words such as *network*, *communion*, *fellowship*?

Identify commonalities across faiths.

Establishing common ground does not mean turning a blind eye to differences. Rather, it is understanding and respecting differences so that people are able to make room for limitations and constraints the various faiths may have regarding issues such as domestic violence, teen pregnancy, maternal and child mortality, and HIV & AIDS.

This will help generate the attitude that, in turn, could increase the likelihood for real dialogue. Moreover, mutual respect amid differences will be cultivated.

Pinpointing the scriptural bases for issues like domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, maternal and child mortality

14 also paves the way for greater understanding of one's own faith and that of others.

"Islam and Christianity are founded on two basic principles: love of the One God and love of neighbor. The textual basis are in both the Glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah for the Muslims and Biblical sources in the Bible [sic]."

"Love of God: *The Holy Prophet said: The best remembrance is: There is no god but God! Love of God is the greatest commandment in the Bible: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One!*

"Love of Neighbor: *The Holy Prophet said: None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself. None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself. In the Bible: And the second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:31)."*

Dr. Hamid Barra
Presentation, *Islam and Interfaith Dialogue:
Glimpses on "A Common Word"*

Promote and sustain pluralism.

Genuine interfaith collaboration can only truly flourish when we learn to respect each other's faith and understand the history behind our religious rituals and practices. These are what will allow us our own unique and diverse ways of living out our faiths for the common good.

It is therefore important to make available new venues where dialogue, healthy debates and exchange of experiences, as well as learning can occur and give rise to interfaith collaboration and action. In such venues, paradigms are put forth, further examined, and if needed, reframed.



ACQUIRE an open and deeper understanding of (a) maternal mortality, (b) HIV & AIDS, (c) gender-based violence, (d) migration and displacement as social justice issues brought about by socio-cultural, political, economic and spiritual factors as well as the overarching subjects of (e) human sexuality, (f) personal transformation and values formation; and to reach out to all including men whose participation is key to genuine societal transformation.



INTEGRATE the knowledge and understanding about these issues in the school curricula, in religious and lay formation programs, and in pastoral work.



TRANSLATE faith into appropriate, collective, and holistic action by (a) developing competence on the issues concerned and their scriptural bases through fora, research and training and other means; (b) developing and using relevant, culture and gender-sensitive, and inclusive language; (c) formulating organizational action plans that are consistent with one's charism; and most importantly, (d) accepting the inadequacy of individual effort as against unified interfaith action by a dynamic and functional collective.

Carried out well, these resolutions should help us bridge the differences across our various faiths, and push FBOs as a diverse but unified force into the mainstream of population and development work. Allowing the creation of a unified entity — network, fellowship, movement or whatever it may be called — is the key towards productive and meaningful interfaith action on contemporary personal and social issues that severely impact on the quality of life.

**For each one of us,
sustaining the energies generated
by the conference to bring these goals to fruition
is the challenge at hand.**

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