

## Peace without Progress

### The Sustainability Dilemma in the Bangsamoro

#### Abstract

This article explores the paradox of “peace without progress” in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), where the signing of peace agreements and development assistance investments have yet to deliver equitable prosperity. While international donors and the Philippine government have implemented numerous development programs, the region continues to exhibit the highest poverty and stunting rates, the lowest literacy and functional rates, and the weakest economic growth in the country. This article argues that the sustainability of peace in the Bangsamoro hinges less on financial inputs than on addressing structural underdevelopment, weak governance, and entrenched political patronage. Sustaining peace in the Bangsamoro will happen if peace translates into tangible improvements in human security, inclusive growth, and institutional resilience.

Keywords: *Bangsamoro, development, official development assistance, sustainable peace*



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Walking past abandoned structures from earlier development programs, unused training centers, idle livelihood facilities, and half-finished infrastructure makes these failures unmistakable. Once presented as symbols of post-conflict reconstruction, they now reflect the struggles of development programs to take root. Fragmented planning, shifting political priorities, and limited local capacity meant that even well-funded projects were rarely sustained. These visible remnants of unrealized progress point back to the deeper historical conditions that shaped the Bangsamoro’s long struggle for peace and development.

**“The Bangsamoro has succeeded in stopping the armed conflict, but it now must win a quieter, and arguably harder battle: the fight against systemic poverty and institutional fragility.”**

For generations, the Bangsamoro people have lived at the intersection of conflict and peace. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), long marked by armed resistance against the Philippine state, carries a legacy of marginalization and underdevelopment. Peace agreements promised transformation, and development assistance followed with the hope that peace would bring prosperity. While fighting between the liberation fronts and the state has ceased, progress in the Bangsamoro has lagged in terms of socioeconomic development compared to other regions in the country. This article argues that

peace in the Bangsamoro has yet to deliver the expected peace dividends. The persistence of poverty, weak institutions, and uneven access to services suggests that peace, while achieved politically, has yet to be realized in everyday life. In the Bangsamoro, these limitations created a vacuum where development programs became increasingly dependent on external actors. As the Philippine government and local institutions struggled to meet urgent reconstruction and livelihood demands, the responsibility of sustaining the peace process gradually extended beyond domestic boundaries. These conditions set the stage for deeper international engagement.

Driven by humanitarian considerations and the pursuit of global stability, international actors have long viewed peace agreements as gateways to development (Eide, 1996; Findley, 2018; Moss et al., 2022). The Bangsamoro peace process exemplifies this international commitment to resolve one of Southeast Asia’s longest-running conflicts. From the 1976 Tripoli Agreement to the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and eventually to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), each agreement sought to transform armed struggle into political participation and prosperity (Akebo, 2021; Duque-Salazar et al., 2022). These milestones paved the way for the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2018, institutionalizing the BARMM government as a symbol of self-determination. Yet as peace became institutionalized through the BOL, expectations of socioeconomic transformation grew among Bangsamoro communities, local political leaders, and civil society organizations. The success of political settlements was now measured not by the absence of war, but by the presence of development.



*Unused and non-functional infrastructure projects from the SZOPAD and ARMM Social Fund programs, photo taken by the author on April 24, 2025, in selected communities in Lanao del Sur, BARMM.*

This transition mobilized vast development resources. International donors, including Japan, Australia, the United States, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other development agencies, joined the Philippine government in funding programs to reduce poverty, expand job opportunities, build infrastructure, and strengthen institutions (Aguja, 2000; Fernandez, 2014). Flagship efforts, such as the UN Multi-Donor Programme, the ARMM Social Fund, the ACT for Peace Programme, and the Mindanao Trust Fund-Reconstruction and Development Programme, signaled the world’s commitment to a stable Bangsamoro.

Despite these extensive development interventions, the benefits remain elusive. Many communities perceive these interventions as externally driven, shaped more by donor agendas than by local priorities, which in turn undermines ownership and sustainability. Official data from the Department

of Economy, Planning, and Development (DEPDev) indicate that Bangsamoro received approximately USD 19.40 million in Official Development Assistance (ODA) project loans and USD 680.355 million in ODA grants from 2003 to 2024, amounts that reflect unprecedented external investment in the region's post-conflict transition.<sup>1</sup> Yet these figures raise an essential question: why has such substantial financial assistance not produced more sustainable improvements in people's everyday lives?

The persistence of weak development outcomes emphasizes this puzzle. Thirteen years after the 1996 FPA, poverty worsened to 61.8% in 2009 (PSA, 2015). In 2023, the Bangsamoro's poverty incidence stands at 23.5%, more than double the national rate of 10.9% (PSA, 2023). Today, despite receiving USD 7.38 billion in annual block grants (2019–2025), the Bangsamoro records the lowest Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) growth in the Philippines, at only 2.7%, compared to the national average of 5.7% (PSA, 2025). These figures emphasize that the Bangsamoro's economic development remains shallow, reflecting persistent gaps between state investment and local absorption capacity. Moreover, these numbers are not abstract; they reflect the lived struggles of families still waiting for jobs, children facing limited learning opportunities, and communities coping with inadequate public services. The disparity between development rhetoric and persistent grassroots hardship emphasizes a troubling contradiction: the promise of peace has not yet delivered broad-based prosperity.

Scholars have long debated whether development assistance can catalyze sustainable peace. Sachs (2006) and Dayanath and Ichihashi (2021) argue that development assistance can accelerate growth, reduce poverty, and strengthen institutions, particularly when focused on education, healthcare, and infrastructure. They suggest that development assistance can enhance resilience and prevent the recurrence of conflict by addressing structural inequality. But critical scholars warn that development assistance is not inherently transformative. Moyo (2009) and Chandler (2017) highlight that external assistance can create dependency, enable elite capture, and sidestep grassroots sectors when not grounded in local realities. These critiques resonate powerfully in the Bangsamoro context, where political clans, institutional fragility, and patronage systems can dilute the intended impact of development programs.

Thus, the challenge is neither the presence of conflict nor the absence of assistance, but whether assistance has genuinely confronted the structural drivers of underdevelopment. As Kabonga (2017) reminds us, the "primary goal of foreign aid is the global eradication of extreme poverty" (p.5). In the Bangsamoro, poverty remains deeply entrenched, and progress in human development continues to lag national levels. According to Chanda et al. (2023), 45% of children under five are affected by stunting, the highest prevalence of stunting in the country in 2023. Similarly, as reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in their 2024 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), the Bangsamoro has the lowest basic and functional literacy rates in the Philippines. Its basic literacy rate is 81.0%, its illiteracy rate is 14.4%, and its functional literacy rate is 59.3% (PSA, 2025). Moreover, the region's human development index remains among the lowest in the Philippines, at about 0.629 (Maboloc, 2025). These data highlight a core disconnect: large-scale programs may exist, and funds may flow, yet the lived outcomes for ordinary people remain inadequate. This gap points to the broader sustainability challenge in post-conflict development. A recent assessment by Timberman and Moner (2025) of the six-year Bangsamoro Transition Authority highlights the persistence of entrenched clan politics, weak institutional capacity, and a shadow economy that undermines both legitimacy and state-sponsored development.

The sustainability of peace in the Bangsamoro ultimately rests on whether governance structures can deliver social services and economic inclusion. Unless assistance and autonomy are matched by transparency and accountability, development risks becoming another unfulfilled promise. To say that there is negative peace, or the absence of large-scale armed conflict between the state and the Moro revolutionary groups, is accurate. To say progress has arrived equitably is far less certain. The Bangsamoro has succeeded in stopping the armed conflict, but it now must win a quieter, and arguably harder battle: the fight against systemic poverty and institutional fragility. Peace without tangible

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<sup>1</sup> Figures supplied by DEPDev.

improvement in daily life is fragile. Peace without justice and opportunity is incomplete. The Bangsamoro story shows that ending conflict is only the first chapter. The next requires addressing deep-rooted inequalities, investing in human capital, strengthening public institutions, and empowering communities, not just funding projects. For peace to truly be sustainable, development must be felt in households, classrooms, farms, and remote villages, and not only in budget books, donor reports, or political speeches. Peace in the Bangsamoro should not remain a political symbol but must become a lived social and economic reality. The challenge now is to transform peace agreements into dignity, block grants into inclusive growth, and assistance into lasting change. Only then can the Bangsamoro people truly say they are not merely living in peace, they are prospering because of it. 

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