“Peace Works” – Birth of an Innovative Group

This is an account of the beginning of a group that potentially has much to offer the new field of peace through health.

Ernest Guevarra, a young Filipino physician, spent some years as international student representative to the Board of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). Upon graduation, Ernest chose to practice in Mindanao, the southernmost large island of the Philippines, and a site of repeated military clashes between government forces and rebel groups. With dreadful repetitiousness, rural families have to leave their fields, tools, animals and homes. They live sometimes for months in terrible conditions in evacuation centres. Those who dare to return to harvest or get tools may be murdered.

Isolated and working against incompetent, callous government services, Ernest strove last year to get help to a population of tens of thousands of displaced people. For this he won a human rights award. He decided to devote these funds to establish a group of health professionals working at grass-roots level in violent conflict or post-conflict settings. Ideally the health workers would seek to improve both health and peace in their settings. Ideally, also, they would be interested in evaluating their interventions and pushing forward knowledge in this area.

Ariana Proochista, current IPPNW student representative and medical and public health student at Oxford, and Nicola Kaatsch, German pediatrician with a history of work in war-affected Somalia, were the co-planners of the meeting which occurred March 26th to April 6th on a rain-forest hillside outside the city of Davao, Mindanao.

They brought together an amazingly diverse group of people, each of them a deep well of rich experiences. Karegeya Davis is a Rwandan physician. From age twelve to thirteen he was a child soldier with the Ugandan army. Part of a refugee community, he returned to Rwanda after the genocide and began setting up services for women victims of the genocide, dealing with the aftermath of rape, HIV/AIDS, widowhood, need for justice from perpetrators, housing, and livelihood. Karegeya also works to outlaw torture in Rwanda. The women’s support group has generated a drama about the horrors of genocide and subsequent movement towards reconciliation. At this time Karageya would like to evaluate the efficacy of the interventions for women who have been raped.

Leonel Ortiz, stocky, swarthy, and moustached, has twenty five years experience as a “health promoter” among the poor in Chiapas. He now works in the Zapatista framework of running a health care system alternative to the inadequate government system. His analysis of context included the negative impacts of globalization on Chiapas peasants – its intent being to clear peasants from the lands, especially in relation to access to oil, on behalf of those who would benefit. He regards his work as intrinsically working for peace in the sense of reversing structural violence – the oppression and exploitation of Chiapas peasants. He wishes to evaluate its effectiveness.

Nelson Martins is a slender dark young physician from East Timor. He saw his father killed by political violence when he was five. At seventeen he joined the clandestine movement for East Timor independence. On a scholarship to study medicine in Indonesia, he led a part of the student movement which non-violently unseated Suharto. For this he was gaoled, lost his scholarship, and had to stop his studies intermittently to earn money. He provided medical services to guerilla forces during the war for independence and against the attempted genocide. Now he runs East Timor’s tuberculosis programme. Nelson was still working on how to incorporate a peace dimension to his work.

The aspect of project work Ernest would like to evaluate is his systematic attempts to have the voices of young people heard in describing what they suffer and what they want. Ernest works with a conflict analysis shared by those most affected. They believe the repeated military incursions are attempts to make life unbearable for indigenous populations. The purpose is to take over land and access to natural gas resources by powerful figures in the government and military. This analysis is at odds with that of the government and main-stream media, which focus on Muslim-Christian conflict, government-secessionist conflict and the terrorism of bandit gangs. US military advisers treat it as part of their so-called global “war against terrorism.”

For a week these lively and diverse people wrestled with what “health” and “peace” mean in their settings and what it means to work for peace through health. There was consensus that the meaning of health to all of us implied living without harm to the world of Nature in addition to the well-known WHO definition of biopsychosocial health. “Nonviolence”
proved contentious when proposed as a guiding principle for the group. Leonel and Nelson had worked closely with groups using military violence. But it was acceptable to say that the group “promotes nonviolence”.

The group’s process was highly participatory, with a minimum of didactic input. They had invited advisers with knowledge of the “peace through health” framework, programme evaluation, evaluation of health, of psychosocial well-being and of peace work.

Each partner completed an evaluation plan and a contract with timelines for access to a small amount of funding for evaluation.

As well as working together to push knowledge forward in this new and difficult field, there is the intention that the group will act for mutual support when new crises arise, as is highly likely in Mindanao, for example. Protective action to counter threats to the lives of members could be called on.

The group hopes it can obtain funding to add further partners interested in evaluating peace through health work, especially after the first round of partners have completed their evaluations.

After a week of hard work in Mindanao, the group held a final event. Ernest had arranged for a group of remarkable local musicians to sing. Sitting around a camp-fire, under an almost-full moon, we listened to excerpts of an extraordinary opera they have composed and performed throughout the Philippines and beyond. “Salima” is the story of a little girl whose family is displaced by the war. Through the wonderful voices of the musicians and their guitars, drums, gamelan gongs and ukulele, we felt Salima’s terror and sadness and wept with her pleas for an end to war.