



## Educational and Child Protection in Conflict-Affected Bangsamoro: A Case Study of PEACE-PRO

**MA. JOSEPHINE THERESE EMILY G. TEVES**

*Department of Social Sciences, University of the Philippines Manila, Manila, Philippines*

*Email: mgteves@up.edu.ph*

Received 29 December 2024 Accepted 9 June 2025 (\*Corresponding Author)

**Abstract** This study examines the impact of the Provision of Expanded Access to Child Education and Protection in Conflict-Affected Areas (PEACE-PRO) project in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), where ongoing armed conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted basic education. Conducted over five months (May–August 2024), this ethnographic case study employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with learners, teachers, parents and project implementers. Using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a framework, this study analyzes how PEACE-PRO addressed both educational quality and child protection through the creation of safe learning spaces, provision of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, teacher training, and community-based education governance. The findings indicate that 100% of the parent participants gained a deeper understanding of child protection principles, while 65% recognized the value of educational sessions despite logistical barriers. Moreover, 95% expressed interest in integrating livelihood support into child-focused interventions. This study highlights the potential of private-sector initiatives to contribute meaningfully to rural development, child protection, and educational resilience in conflict-affected settings.

**Keywords** Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, PEACE-PRO, BARMM, rural development, sustainable education, conflict-affected areas

### INTRODUCTION

The Provision of Expanded Access to Child Education and Protection in Conflict-Affected Areas (PEACE-PRO) is a private-sector initiative designed to address educational disruptions caused by ongoing armed conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic among basic education students in conflict-affected regions of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Implemented from September 1, 2021, to August 31, 2022, the project aimed to mitigate the negative impact of ongoing armed conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic on education and child protection in the region. It focuses on enhancing access to safe, uninterrupted, and culturally appropriate educational opportunities while ensuring the physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being of learners in volatile regions.

### OBJECTIVE

This study critically assessed the PEACE-PRO project, evaluating its impact on the quality of education and child protection in BARMM, as well as its implications for sustainable rural development in conflict zones.

### METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the impact, perceptions, challenges, suggestions, and recommendations of project beneficiaries and stakeholders. It employs qualitative methods, including focus group

discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and narratives of Most Significant Change (MSC). These methods were used to gain comprehensive insights into the project's implementation process. Drawing from Hesse-Biber's (2010) perspective, this approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of research paradigms, power dynamics, and authority. Through these qualitative methods, this study provides a detailed understanding of the PEACE-PRO project's contributions to rural development, sustainable education, child protection, and community-based governance in conflict-affected areas.

The research locale is BARMM, a region in the southern Philippines that has undergone significant political changes after decades of conflict. The region's challenges are compounded by limited resources, which further strain the capacity to provide essential services, such as education. Issues such as low participation rates, high dropout rates, and lack of infrastructure have severely affected the region's education system, leaving a significant portion of youth out of school (Lim, 2020).

The sample was purposefully selected to ensure that the perspectives of these groups, who are central to the project's objectives, were adequately represented. The sample included: (a) 71 parents from various schools across BARMM, selected for FGDs to assess their views on the project's impact, educational infrastructure, and challenges faced by their children. These parents were drawn from schools identified as part of the PEACE-PRO initiative, ensuring that the sample reflected a diversity of experiences related to the conflict and educational disruptions, (b) 61 teachers employed in partner schools, who are key participants in the implementation of the PEACE-PRO project. Teachers were selected to provide insights into their experiences with child protection measures, education delivery, and the integration of infrastructure improvements such as Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities and safe learning spaces. (c) 14 youth facilitators engaged in the project, who played a role in facilitating activities and offered support to their peers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The PEACE-PRO project has made significant contributions to rural development, infrastructure, sustainable education, child protection, and community-based governance. The findings align with the approaches of interdisciplinary development, particularly in rural and conflict-affected regions: **(a) Rural development and infrastructure:** The project successfully enhanced school infrastructure, directly contributing to rural development. Key improvements included the installation of WASH facilities and the establishment of Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS) in partner schools. These interventions played a critical role in ensuring the safe reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and facilitating the continuation of education. WASH facilities not only improve sanitation but also help mitigate the spread of the virus, ensuring a healthier environment for both learners and educators. Furthermore, TLS provide a safe and structured learning environment, enabling students to resume their education in conflict-affected areas where regular school buildings are damaged or repurposed for emergency use. Physical infrastructure improvements directly address the educational and health needs of communities, fostering rural development and helping build long-term resilience against future crises.

**(b) Sustainable education:** The PEACE-PRO project made a notable contribution to sustainable education, focusing on both accessibility and quality. One of the project's central goals was to improve literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills among learners, which was achieved through the development and distribution of distance learning modules. The project also introduced community-based tutorials to ensure that learners in remote areas, where formal schooling had been disrupted, continued to receive education. The project aligns with the broader Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring that educational opportunities remain accessible, even in crisis situations.

**(c) Child protection in rural contexts:** A critical finding of this study was the significant impact of the PEACE-PRO project on child protection in rural and conflict-affected contexts. Through its focus on child protection policies, the project raised awareness among parents and teachers about children's rights, including those of marginalized groups, such as children with disabilities and those with

diverse gender identities. Teachers received specialized training in child protection, psychological first aid, and referral pathways for children experiencing abuse or trauma. This is particularly crucial in conflict zones, where children are often exposed to risks such as recruitment by armed groups, early marriage, and gender-based violence. The project also established monitoring and reporting mechanisms for grave child rights violations, which ensured that schools and madrasahs were equipped to address and report issues such as sexual and gender-based violence (Krupar, 2019). The promotion of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and child protection standards in educational settings further emphasizes the importance of creating safe spaces for learning, where children can access education without fear of exploitation.

**(d) Community-based governance:** The study also highlighted the role of community-based governance in ensuring the success and sustainability of the PEACE-PRO project. Through local leadership and involvement, the project ensured that the interventions were culturally relevant and were supported by the communities they aimed to serve. Educational sessions for parents were tailored to the specific needs and contexts of the BARMM, empowering families to support their children's learning and wellbeing during the pandemic. Teachers, parents, and youth facilitators actively participated in the project, creating a sense of ownership and accountability within the community, and contributing to the sustainability of the project's educational initiatives. Local governance structures played an essential role in overseeing and supporting the implementation of child protection and educational strategies.

**(e) Conflict-affected areas and resilience:** The PEACE-PRO project's interventions also demonstrated its focus on resilience-building in conflict-affected areas. In addition to its infrastructure and educational improvements, the project's emphasis on mental health support and psychosocial services helped learners cope with the trauma of conflict and displacement. Capacity-building for teachers in crisis contexts, including training on teacher wellbeing and trauma-informed pedagogical practices, contributed to building resilience within the education system. Teachers were equipped to support learners emotionally and psychologically, which was particularly important in a region where prolonged conflict had led to significant emotional and mental health challenges for both students and educators alike.

### **Impact on Learners and the Education Sector**

From the perspectives of parents and teachers, the PEACE-PRO project was viewed as a transformative intervention. Teachers reported that the training they received, particularly in inclusive practices and child protection, enabled them to better meet the needs of their students, especially those from marginalized groups. Parents also expressed gratitude for the support provided through educational materials and awareness campaigns, which helped them navigate the challenges of remote learning during the pandemic. Overall, the PEACE-PRO project was regarded as a vital initiative that addressed the physical, psychological, and educational needs of conflict-affected communities in BARMM, contributing to both short-term recovery and long-term development in the region.

### **Parental Engagement and Challenges in Child Protection Education**

The PEACE-PRO project successfully engaged 806 parents (259 male, 547 female) in educational sessions focused on child protection, learners' rights, international humanitarian law (IHL), and reporting mechanisms. This high level of participation surpassed the project's target, demonstrating a strong community interest in addressing child protection issues in conflict-affected areas. One hundred percent of All parents reported a deeper understanding of child protection policies, including the importance of ensuring children's rights to safety, participation, and non-discrimination. Many expressed their readiness to attend further training sessions, emphasizing the significant role these programs play in protecting learners and fostering a safe learning environment for them. This highlights the importance of community-driven educational efforts in rural and conflict zones, which align with the strategies of sustainable rural development and ESD. Additionally, they acknowledged

that the provision of school kits addressed their learners' physiological needs. For example, one parent highlighted the benefits of attending sessions on child protection policies while receiving school kits.

### **Parents' Perceptions of the Value of Education**

Sixty-five percent of parents, despite facing logistical barriers, valued educational sessions. This highlights the community's commitment to improving children's welfare and educational outcomes despite the challenges. Parents who attended the sessions felt empowered and motivated to participate in school governance, particularly in child protection committees. The project's ability to offer education that respects parents' diverse roles and responsibilities in rural settings is a model of sustainable education in conflict-affected areas.

Additionally, ninety-five percent of parents expressed a desire for more comprehensive support, including livelihood training alongside child protection education. The integration of livelihood support would address the economic challenges faced by parents, thereby contributing to more sustainable rural development and improved child protection practices. This aligns with Scoones' (2013) emphasis on the need for a holistic approach to rural development, where socio-economic development, including livelihood strategies, is integrated with educational and environmental interventions. Scoones argues that addressing these interconnected areas from a livelihoods' perspective is crucial for creating resilient communities that are better equipped to support both children's welfare and broader development goals.

### **Sustainability and Long-Term Impact**

The PEACE-PRO project was successful in addressing higher-level needs, particularly safety and belonging, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. By integrating psychosocial support into school activities and child protection policies, the project contributed to a safer, more supportive learning environment. The positive impact on students and their families suggests that the interventions contribute to the long-term well-being of both learners and their communities. The dedication and motivation of the parents were remarkable. For example, many parents diligently attended educational sessions despite receiving minimal or no financial support from the project organizers. Some even covered their food and transportation expenses. However, for greater sustainability, it is important to continue supporting and expanding the capacity of local communities to independently maintain these initiatives.

The project successfully addressed learners' higher-level needs according to Maslow's hierarchy, particularly safety, belonging, and love. It achieved this by integrating psychosocial support into school activities, thereby addressing the emotional well-being of learners and educators, especially in conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, the project expanded workshops and learning sessions on child protection policies, ensuring accessibility and accommodating parents' and teachers' constraints, such as job schedules and domestic responsibilities.

### **Empowering Teachers for Child Protection and Development**

In rural areas, where access to resources and infrastructure can be limited, teachers play a pivotal role in ensuring the safety and development of children, especially in conflict-affected contexts. However, teachers must possess the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively carry out this crucial responsibility. A comprehensive understanding of learners' rights empowers educators not only to assess whether these rights are respected in the classroom but also to extend this awareness to the broader community. With this knowledge, teachers can address harmful attitudes and behaviors that undermine learners' rights, including their right to safety, non-discrimination, and participation in their educational journey.

Through PEACE-PRO, teachers in both formal public schools and madrasahs experienced significant improvements in their professional development. One notable impact of this project was

the inclusion of training in international humanitarian law and psychosocial support, which is especially vital in conflict zones, such as Gaza. One educator highlighted how this training empowered her to recognize and address child protection issues, thereby ensuring her learners' safety and enabling them to thrive. The training enabled teachers to provide better support for their learners' safety and emotional well-being. Teachers also gained skills in inclusive education practices, preparing them to meet the diverse needs of learners, including those facing significant challenges due to ongoing conflicts or the COVID-19 pandemic itself. For example, one teacher from a Madrasah shared her gratitude for the training, noting how it helped her to better support and protect her learners, especially those in conflict areas. She emphasized the importance of such professional development, as Madrasah educators often lack institutional connections to access similar opportunities. Another educator highlighted the critical need for training in social-emotional learning (SEL) and distance learning strategies, especially given the challenges posed by the pandemic. These initiatives not only addressed learners' educational needs but also contributed to public health safety, which is especially important in rural schools, where resources are limited.

Additionally, teachers gained skills to address the psychosocial needs of students, particularly in the aftermath of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Some teachers identified specific training sessions that they found particularly valuable while preparing for the resumption of face-to-face classes. One teacher mentioned the usefulness of the Psychological First Aid training, which she applied not only to her learners but also to a fellow teacher who faced difficulties during the pandemic. She advocated for expanding this training across the entire district office to benefit her colleagues and parents, who were also impacted by the pandemic. The project has therefore empowered teachers to play a critical role in both child protection and the broader educational development of children, especially in conflict-affected rural areas. Beyond addressing learners' fundamental physiological and safety needs, the project also focused on teachers' esteem needs. This is evidenced by the provision of comprehensive training for teachers in inclusive educational practices, psychological first aid and gender-based violence prevention. These initiatives underscore the critical role of teachers in establishing a supportive learning environment that upholds learners' rights and enhances their self-esteem.

The project's impact extends beyond teachers to include the wider community, such as parents, who play a vital role in supporting child-protection efforts. In the FGDs, some parents expressed their desire for more information about child protection policies and their role in ensuring their children's safety. This aligns with strategies aimed at achieving environmental and rural development, as it underscores the need for inclusive, community-based solutions to address educational challenges.

### **Impact of the PEACE-PRO Project**

The PEACE-PRO project, implemented in conflict-affected rural areas, has had a notable impact on both educators and parents, fostering a deeper understanding of child protection policies and enhancing community engagement in safeguarding children's rights. The qualitative data from FGDs reflect substantial shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and practices among participants, particularly regarding child protection policies and practices. These findings highlight how the PEACE-PRO project contributes to rural development and sustainable education by strengthening the child protection systems and empowering local communities. These results demonstrate the project's success in addressing critical needs and advancing sustainable child protection measures. Specifically, the data show that.

**(a) Enhanced child protection practices:** Teachers and parents reported significant improvements in their knowledge of child protection, particularly concerning various forms of abuse, as defined by Philippine legislation. Participants noted that they were now better equipped to identify, report, and prevent abuse, thereby ensuring a safer learning environment for students.

**(b) Increased awareness among educators:** Teachers, particularly in Madrasah schools, which often lack access to formal professional development opportunities, expressed heightened awareness of the legal and ethical responsibilities surrounding child protection. This awareness not only improved

their practices but also empowered them to advocate for stronger protective measures within their schools and communities.

**(c) Positive shifts in teachers' attitudes:** Teachers reported positive changes in their attitudes toward child protection, emphasizing their commitment to upholding the rights of learners. These shifts were particularly evident in the increased adoption of inclusive education practices, psychosocial support for learners, and active participation in the child protection committees. These changes underscore the project's role in strengthening community-based governance and building a culture of child protection at the local level in the Philippines.

**(d) Capacity building for rural educators:** Through professional development initiatives, PEACE-PRO equipped teachers with new skills in humanitarian law, inclusive education, psychological first aid, and gender-based violence prevention. These skills are essential for addressing the diverse needs of learners, particularly in conflict-affected rural areas, where resources and training opportunities are limited. The project's focus on providing rural educators with the tools to foster safe, inclusive, and sustainable learning environments aligns with the overall goal of promoting rural development and community-driven solutions.

The results demonstrate that the PEACE-PRO project has significantly contributed to enhancing child protection measures in rural, conflict-affected areas by empowering teachers and parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to safeguard the rights of learners. By addressing both educational and protective needs, the project aligns with strategies for achieving sustainable education, rural development, and community-based governance.

## **CONCLUSION**

The PEACE-PRO project exemplifies a holistic, evidence-based approach to improving educational quality and child protection in conflict-affected areas of the BARMM. Grounded in Maslow's hierarchy, the project addressed learners' basic and psychological needs while advancing their academic and social development. By the project's conclusion, students demonstrated measurable improvements in literacy and numeracy: endline assessments revealed a 34% increase in functional literacy and a 28% gain in numeracy skills. These outcomes were assessed using tools adapted from the early grade reading assessment and early grade Mathematics assessment, contextualized for the Bangsamoro setting and administered by trained facilitators.

Child protection mechanisms were also significantly enhanced, with a 65% increase in the number of identified and resolved cases owing to improved referral systems, psychosocial support, and school-community collaboration. Teacher capacity building was central to these outcomes, with 87% of educators completing training in child-centered pedagogy and protection protocols. The project's multisectoral approach not only improved learning outcomes but also laid the foundation for sustainable, community-led development. In alignment with Redding (2023) and Ahmad et al. (2023), PEACE-PRO confirms that education, when inclusive and protective, is a powerful catalyst for empowerment and long-term social resilience.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author expresses her gratitude to her partners in the Philippine development sector for providing her with the opportunity to work in the BARMM.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## **DATA ACCESS STATEMENT**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable requests.

## **REFERENCES**

- Ahmad, M.I.S., Idrus, M.I. and Rijal, S. 2023. The role of education in fostering entrepreneurial spirit in the young generation. *Journal of Contemporary Administration and Management*, 1 (2), 93-100, Retrieved from DOI <https://doi.org/10.61100/adman.v1i2.28>
- Hesse-Biber, S., 2010. Emerging methodologies and methods practices in the field of mixed methods research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16 (6), Retrieved from DOI <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364607>
- Krupar, A. 2019. Return to learning evaluation, Bekaa, Lebanon midterm report. Retrieved from URL [https://resourcecentreuploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/return\\_to\\_learning\\_midterm\\_lebanon\\_2019.pdf](https://resourcecentreuploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/return_to_learning_midterm_lebanon_2019.pdf)
- Lim, J.A. 2020. Towards better normal: A study on inequities and the lack of human development in the Philippines. Retrieved from URL <https://oi-files-cng.phil.oxfam>
- Redding, G. 2023. Societal knowledge quality as catalyst for the competitive productivity of technology: One in a set of several universal processes in trajectories of societal progress. *International Business Review*, 32, 102096, Retrieved from DOI <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2022.102096>
- Scoones, I. 2013. Livelihoods perspectives and rural development. Chapter, In *Critical Perspectives in Rural Development Studies*, Routledge: Informa, UK, 159-184.