

**Keynote Address of Noraida Abdullah Karim
“Voices of Courage” Award Ceremony
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Assalamu Alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuho! Peace be upon you!

Today, I happily accept this prestigious award, not for anything I have done, but for the opportunity it gives me to speak about the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao, southern Philippines. My journey from Mindanao to the United States will be worthwhile if, after my departure, you and others like you devote greater energy and resources to promoting peace in my homeland.

I come from the province of Maguindanao, where violence has existed for more than 30 years. I still see very clearly in my mind our family being forced to rush from one place to another, always looking for safety. We had to run because we had to survive.

I basically grew up in an evacuation center. Life in an evacuation center is miserable. It is harder than anyone who has not experienced it

can ever imagine. Those who go to an evacuation center go there simply because they have no other choice.

Our family of farmers suffered economically and emotionally. Because of on-going conflict, we could not work the fields and earn even an income to survive. My siblings and I could no longer go to school, not knowing if and when we could go back again. Some of my friends lost their hope for getting an education—their dreams were shattered. I hated the situation we were in, but I did not know where to place the blame. I was angry, confused, and hurt.

Despite the hopeless reality of that time, I did not give up my dream of a better future. I did not want to fail or to be useless. I knew I needed to be in school. So I made it my mission to finish elementary and high school. And how did I do this? I sold on the sidewalk food cooked by my family and used the small earnings to both help my family and pay my school expenses.

After several years helping my fellow Muslims organize, lobby for peace, and meet their needs, I decided I would act on my dream of a college education. I became a household helper for some of our relatives

and paid for my schooling. I graduated with a degree in social work. I took the national licensure examination and became a professional social worker. My dream came true.

Several years later, I was hired by Community and Family Services International (CFSI). Being part of the CFSI Family is also a dream come true for me. Growing up in the middle of constant armed conflict, I became insecure and unsure of myself. CFSI saw something in me that I did not see myself—the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of others. Six years later, I was named the head of CFSI operations in Mindanao.

Building trust is a major challenge in Mindanao.

Many of us in Mindanao are very suspicious, always thinking that we are being used, neglected and marginalized. It is because of the long experience of conflict. We don't know whom to trust and we don't know who is telling the truth. We always feel betrayed because a lot of promises have been made, only to be broken the next day. We have seen peace agreements reached, only to see back-to-back violations by all sides.

I have learned that trust can be built by being honest, exerting effort to prove one's sincerity in working with communities, facilitating activities that lessen the feeling of being marginalized, and sharing the burdens of the people.

Let me share two quick examples with you. When CFSI began working with the people of Inug-ug in 2001, virtually all the children, women, and men were living in evacuation centers. The people of this small farming and fishing village had been repeatedly displaced by violence and armed conflict. They were distrustful of one another and especially distrustful of outsiders. Infant and maternal mortality rates were high. Most parents had less than six years of education if they had any at all. There were no schools within the village. People could not read, could not write and many were illiterate. Incomes were low and hope was hard to find.

Community and Family Services International helped these people organize. Together with the villagers we set priorities: Education, ways to make a living, clean water, health services and shelter.

Over the course of the last five years, the people of Inug-ug have constructed—through voluntary labor, food-for-work initiatives, and the support of others—twelve (12) permanent classrooms now accommodating almost 700 students led by twelve teachers and coordinated by one principal, most of whom work on a full-time basis for a small stipend. The people also constructed twenty-five (25) homes, with widows and orphans being the primary beneficiaries. Some of the residents learned carpentry and some prepared hundreds of lunches wrapped in banana leaves for community volunteers. Others produced school uniforms. These newly developed skills will go with these people wherever they go.

The second example of our work is a pilot project we did for the World Bank. This project focused on helping people earn a living. Women and young men learned reading, writing and arithmetic. They learned to plant vegetable gardens, they sold vegetable for income. We gave each 20 dollars to start their businesses. Women began raising ducks and chickens. Some people made and sold building materials from bamboo and nipa palm. Young men got fishing nets. One group of young

men became bakers. This program is now followed in more than 600 villages. These successes give me energy to continue my work.

The recognition you have given me—and through me my organization—is an affirmation of our work. It challenges us to continue with renewed strength, commitment, and energy. It will also help me encourage others in my homeland to once again dream and to work hard for lasting and genuine peace in Mindanao.

It is my dream that this award will serve as an inspiration for, and challenge to, every Muslim woman in the world. I firmly believe we have a role to play wherever hope and life is at stake. We must serve as instruments of hope and peace.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts...and dreams with you.

Wassalamu Alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuho. Again, peace be upon you!